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THE HUGE BOWLDER CAME CRASHING DOWN UPON THE LEDGE, THEN PLUNGED
INTO THE DIZZY DEPTHS BELOW.

THE DEAD-CENTER SHOT.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

A PERILOUS TRAIL.

ALONG the high and narrow mountain-trail slowly wended the little cavalcade—two guides, two men—father and son—and a maiden, all well mounted, when, suddenly, Pritty Poll, the guide in the lead, halted.

"What is it—a bear?" demanded the elder gentleman, Mr. Merrydew.

"B'ar nothin'. It's only—Holy smokel Back, rein back, for your lives!" yelled Poll.

"Merciful Heaven! They're both lost!"

High up on the steep slope, many feet above the narrow ledge along which that perilous trail wound, a stone broke from its fastenings and came rolling downward. No larger than the

human hand when clinched, its fall might have passed unnoticed but for what followed.

Two, three, a dozen bits of loose shale were set in motion, making a rustling, clattering sound that caused Andrew Merrydew to glance upward with that lazy query, his pale-blue eyes resting on the thin fringe of stunted bushes through which the stone had forced its way; but, instead of the frightened wild beast which he anticipated seeing, a far more terrible monster suddenly leaped into view.

The bushes were crushed flat by a huge boulder, near the base of which they had been growing.

Its first half-turn had been sluggish, but then, as though just realizing the absence of the tiny key which had held it imprisoned for ages, the great rock plunged downward, gaining momentum and doubling its speed with each revolution, sending a vicious spray of splintered rock and dirt and gravel in advance, causing the mountain's side to quake and shiver as it thundered straight for the terrified travelers below.

With a yell of terror, Pritty Poll ducked his head and spurred his horse onward, thinking only of his own safety in that moment of horror, while his pard, Telescope Charley, bringing up the rear, wrenched his steed back upon its haunches as he uttered that warning cry.

Andrew Merrydew obeyed, his florid face turning ghastly pale as he clung desperately to mane and pommel, speechless with horror as he witnessed the peril of the young couple directly in the path of that rock avalanche—his son Luther and the young lady, Una Freestone.

Luther followed closely after their guide, but his face was turned backward, and his cry of warning changed to one of fierce despair as he saw the woman he loved almost in the jaws of a terrible death.

Both horse and rider seemed paralyzed by terror, the one trembling in every limb, the other gazing with wide eyes at that death-rock, as it came leaping directly toward her.

"Una, spur on!" cried Luther, fiercely wrenching at his horse's mouth, but without effect on the terrified beast. "Una, my love! Rouse up, or—"

The maiden started at that call, dropping the reins and stretching out her gloved hands toward the speaker, gasping:

"Save me—I can't make him go!"

There was but one chance, and Luther Merrydew instantly made the most of it, though in so doing he must have known he was risking his own life, with hardly a hope of escaping death.

Rolling backward from the saddle, leaving his frightened horse to follow the leading guide, he rushed back along the narrow ledge and past the pack-mules, and fairly tore the maiden from her saddle, crouching down close to the rock wall, just as the huge boulder came crashing down upon the ledge, then plunging into the dizzy depths below, leaving only a hideous blotch of blood and quivering flesh where the terrified horse had stood but an instant before.

Then it was that Andrew Merrydew uttered that ejaculation of mingled awe and horror, for he believed that the others had perished with the beast, for all was swallowed up by the torrent of shale and dirt and debris that followed hard upon the mass of rock.

A portion of the ledge had been broken away by the boulder as it crushed the horse, and the remainder of the trail, for the space of a dozen yards, was blocked by the debris, some of which even reached the hoofs of young Merrydew's horse, causing it to plunge and back into the ranks of the pack-mules behind, fairly pushing one of them over the escarpment, to be dashed to pulp on the ragged rocks a hundred yards below.

"Good Lawd!" wailed Charley, making a frantic grasp at the other mules. "Thar goes Jinney, an' the cookin' outfit's bu'sted all to thunder!"

It was the one touch of comedy that renders a tragedy all the more impressive, but the senior Merrydew had no time just then to rebuke his henchman, for the debris ahead began to shake and crumble over the ledge as—

"Help, here! Do you want us to smother under—Una, my love! You are not dead?"

The voice was that of Luther Merrydew, and he was desperately tearing the dirt and stones away from the maiden whom he had snatched from out the grim jaws of death as by a miracle.

"Stiddy, boss! We'll hev ye out in a minnit. You Telescope!"

"Holy smoke—if I do say it!" panted the camp-cook, forgetting the loss of his mule and outfit in his growing amazement. "The boss. The leddy. An' Pritty Poll!"

"Scratch gravel, you!" growled the guide, setting his mate a good example from that end of the miniature landslide. "Stiddy, boss, an' we'll do the gopherin'."

"The hull outfit. An' nobody lost 'ceptin' Jinney. Waal, waal, ef I ever did I hope I never!" croaked Charley, giving one regretful glance over the cliff where his pet mule had vanished forever, then passing Andrew Merrydew to assist his mate in clearing the trail.

Luther Merrydew had ceased his efforts the

moment he had cleared the debris away from the upper portion of that loved form, fierce despair tugging at his heart-strings as he noted the closed eyes and ghastly pale face. He forgot all else in that sickening dread lest, after all, his efforts to preserve her life had been in vain.

"Una, my love, my darling!" he muttered, pressing his lips to hers as he drew the girl closer to his heaving chest.

He threw his head back with a stifled cry, for surely— Ay! Una Freestone opened her eyes.

"Thank Heaven for this!" fervently uttered the man, his dark face lighting up with mingled love and hope. "I did save you, Una! You are not hurt! You understand what I am saying, darling?"

The young woman seemed to understand what he was doing, for she turned her face aside, throwing out a hand that shielded her lips from his passionate caresses.

"Don't! How dare you! I never— Let me go, sir!"

His dark face turned pale through its liberal coating of dust and perspiration, though one less deeply interested might have reasoned that the young woman could hardly have known what she said, just then.

"I thought—I feared you were dead, Una. And then—I loved you so dearly."

"My dear child! My gallant lad! I never witnessed a more daring or generous exploit in the whole course of my personal experience! I must embrace you both—I really must!" spluttered Andrew Merrydew, having abandoned his horse and coming forward as far as the obstructed trail would permit, his fat face fairly aglow with strong emotion as he stretched out his stumpy arms toward the young couple.

They were still buried to the waist by the loose debris, though neither had received more than trifling bruises, thanks to the prompt movements of the young man, whose athletic figure, bowed over the maiden as he pressed her close to the rock wall, had shielded her almost perfectly, while the little avalanche of dirt and shale had slipped from his broad shoulders, leaving only the finer particles to settle about their forms.

Una made no answer to that apology, but her gloved hands fell to work at the debris as though their owner was anxious to be at freedom once more. And Luther Merrydew, with a tinge of sullenness in his darkly-handsome countenance, seconded her efforts in silence.

Only the elder traveler was idle, and the trail was quickly cleared, Luther handing Una Freestone past the grinning guide to a point of safety, where she sat down with a low murmur:

"Leave me—for a little. I'm grateful for what you've done, but—"

"Angry because I betrayed my love for you?" supplemented the man, his black eyes glowing redly as they gazed upon her pale face. "Is that what you started to say, Miss Freestone?"

"Don't—I beg of you, dear friend," brokenly murmured the maiden, visibly shrinking. "I owe you my life. I saw death coming, and could not escape it. Only for you—"

"Only for me you would have shared the fate of your horse. Only for me you would have died, without time even to breathe a prayer. Yet you turn from me in loathing when—"

"Not that; only— Why will you force me to utter ungrateful words, Luther Merrydew?"

"Because I'm an idiot. Because I'm fool enough to madly love a girl who was born without even the semblance of a heart. Because I can't break myself of hoping, even while knowing all this," his voice growing more passionate as he caught both her hands between his, holding them with a grip that almost frightened her by its fierceness.

"Una, I must hope! Such love as mine must in the end win its sweet reward. If not—if I had not believed this, neither you nor I would be here now!"

"You are hurting me, Mr. Merrydew!"

"I saw you in the pathway of death. I knew that I, and I alone, might save you. I did save you, Una. But—as there is a heaven above us this day! if I hadn't hoped to win your love in return for mine, I would have sprung to your side, just the same; I would have clasped you to my bosom, just as I did; but instead of fleeing from death, I would have faced it without flinching, knowing that in death no other man could rob me of my love!"

He did not pause for a reply, but releasing her hands, he turned away to join his father and the two mountaineers, who were already preparing to resume their perilous journey.

Telescope Charley was bewailing the loss of his mule and camp outfit, but Pritty Poll bluntly cut his lamentations short with:

"Button up, pard! Go pick up the pieces, ef ye like, while we make camp. It's only one night out, at the wu'st, an' I reckon we kin git 'long with toastin'-sticks fer once ef we hev to."

Young Merrydew arranged his saddle for Una's use, and after a comparatively brief delay the little party were once more in motion, winding along the side of the mountain toward

the pleasant-appearing valley ahead, in which it had already been arranged their night-camp was to be pitched.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNINVITED GUEST.

At the foot of the ledge, Telescope Charley left the party and turned back into the gloomy canyon, to recover such articles as might have escaped ruin in Jinney's fall, while Pritty Poll led the way to a cozy camping spot near the brink of a murmuring brook, in a little grove of trees.

He started a fire, pitched a small tent for Una's use, then slouched off with the expressed intention of helping his mate bring back the plunder from the base of the cliff.

Comparatively brief though the interval had been since their adventure on the ledge, Luther Merrydew seemed to have gained a complete victory over himself, and he was once more the genial companion of the past few days, greatly to the relief of Una Freestone.

"All's well that end's well, Miss Una," he said, smiling frankly into her half-frightened, half-beseeching countenance as a silent assurance that he meant not to offend again after the same fashion. "This little adventure will prolong our journey an hour or so, but we can stand that with the fair prospect of good news ahead in waiting."

"Then you think there is no mistake?"

"I don't see how there can be. The word comes straight enough. An old friend and partner of the long-missing Paul Solander lives at Peerless Flats, and he surely ought to be able to give us the lost clew to the—well, say golden phantom," with a little laugh.

"Is it anything more than a phantom?" earnestly asked the young woman, her large eyes, so darkly blue as to appear purple in that light, filling with grave doubts. "Sometimes I fear I am worse than foolish in trying to follow up such a dim and uncertain clew—if clew it is. May it not be all an idle vagary born of a diseased brain? You know there are not lacking people who hint that Paul Solander was crazy."

"There was method in his madness, then," laughed Luther, taking an easy position on the ground between the little tent and the campfire. "That cryptogram looks crazy enough, to be sure, at first glance, but I'm 'way off in my guess if this phantom of gold don't turn out to be a glorious reality. And then—when you are an heiress of marvelous wealth—well, I'll still be lying at your feet, Una."

A glance from his dark eyes pointed the incomplete speech, and a faint flush suffused Una Freestone's cheeks as she averted her eyes to follow the movements of portly Andrew Merrydew, who was busied in gathering materials for a cold lunch, while waiting for the return of their two guides.

It was a rather peculiar situation in which the maiden found herself, and though she had often regretted yielding to the impulse which had started her off into these wilds, she never did so half as keenly as now.

It is too long a story to give in full, at this point, but a few hints may not come amiss, in view of what is to follow.

Years before, a certain Paul Solander vanished from mortal ken, but leaving behind him a curious will, by which the young people, Una Freestone and Mark Bywater, were left a vast fortune, unless that will deliberately lied.

That fortune was to be shared equitably between the pair, when certain conditions were complied with, the main one of which may be indicated:

Until or unless the two heirs, male and female, should fall in love with and marry each other, that fortune was forever to remain a phantom; but in case such union should take place, be it when and where it might, the missing clew to the hidden treasure would be made known to them.

There was nothing to show by what means, or through what agency this knowledge was to reach the newly-wedded couple. It might be a clumsy jest. There might be no fortune at all. Only—

Paul Solander was known to have passed long years in the gold regions, and rumors had come back to his old home of his having "struck it rich," as few mortals are fortunate enough to do.

When that curious will was first made public, neither Mark Bywater nor Una Freestone were much more than children, and years passed by before the young people met in the flesh. Then—just how or just why no other persons seemed to know—they parted, apparently in anger. And up to the present date, they had never met again.

Andrew Merrydew, a lawyer of some note, had long known the parents of Una Freestone, and after their death, he was given or assumed the guardianship of the girl. He felt great interest in Paul Solander's will, and declared that the whole truth should be brought to light, if human perseverance and ingenuity could bring it about.

He set his agents to work tracing up the long-missing miner, and finally declared that he had

gained a clew which was well worth following out to the end. He gained Una's consent to act, with her co-operation, and when all preparations to that end had been made, he sprung a surprise upon the maiden.

He had frequently spoken of his noble son, Luther, who had led a wandering life for years, but he gave Una no notice of that son's return, in time to join them in their quest for—as he jestingly dubbed it—"The Golden Phantom."

Almost immediately Luther began to make love to the really charming ward of his father, and this culminated, as detailed, at the time of their narrow escape from death by the falling boulder.

In company they reached Jubilee Junction, a flourishing mining-town in the mountains, where Merrydew, the elder, declared that the longed-for clew was to be picked up. This came in the guise of "Pritty Poll," a rugged mountaineer, who apparently owed his title to his preternatural ugliness of face and figure, who said that, by journeying on to Peerless Flats, they might find an old pard who could tell them all about the last days of Paul Solander.

There was no line of stages running from Jubilee Junction to the Flats, hence horses and pack-mules were engaged, together with their owner, "Telescope Charley," so called from his extraordinary length and slimness, added to his peculiar manner of walking, each step seeming to shut and open his frame at least a foot.

This engagement was necessary because the trip from town to town was too long to be made in one day, and then, as another line of stages ran from the Flats to Paragon City by which the trio could make their way back to the railroad, mules were necessary to convey their baggage.

While his son and his ward were discussing the "Golden Phantom" and their chances of ever seeing it materialize, Andrew Merrydew prepared a fairly plentiful meal, to which he invited the young people.

"No use to wait for the men," he declared, smacking his lips in hungry anticipation as he inspected the viands. "And even if they do come soon, I fear they'll be minus the utensils for cooking."

"Charley seemed to lament the loss of Jinney and her load far more than he would have grieved over our demise," laughed Luther, deftly supplying Una's plate with food.

"Don't laugh, son," gravely warned the elder Merrydew, his little eyes beaming admiringly upon that darkly-handsome face, so different from his own florid, irregular features. "It was terrible! And only for your noble daring, I'd now be weeping tears of blood over—"

"Let it pass, father," with a frown and swift glance toward the still pale face of the maiden. "I only did my duty."

"As no other man could or would have done," nodded Merrydew, with decision. "I'm a proud parent this night, and—"

"Una is turning pale at the bare memory. Will you hush, father?"

There was a stern force about this speech that produced the desired effect, and Mr. Merrydew said no more.

But that little seemed to have robbed Una of her faint hunger, and, after trifling with her food for a few minutes, she murmured an excuse and beat a retreat to the door of her tent.

Luther muttered a few words of reproof, and then the two men finished their meal in silence, after which they drew nearer the fire, lighting their cigars and assuming easy positions on the grass, waiting for the return of their men.

The sun had sunk to rest, and twilight was very brief down in that valley, owing to the rugged hills on either side. But it was not quite dark when an uninvited visitor came into the camp.

Not a sound heralded his approach, and the first intimation either Merrydew had of his coming was when the stranger abruptly passed by the fire to squat beside the cloth on which lay the remains of their supper, fragments of which he snatched up and eagerly crowded into his mouth, growling faintly the while, not unlike the half-wild beast which he resembled in looks.

The elder Merrydew shrunk away in frightened amazement, and Luther instinctively dropped a hand to the pistol at his waist; but the intruder paid not the slightest attention to either man, seemingly having thoughts only for the food before him.

A tall, gaunt figure, wonderfully muscular despite its emaciation. Broad shoulders, long, sinewy limbs, bony hands that seemed armed with the crooked talons of a wild beast.

His head was bare of covering, save for the shaggy, tangled locks of almost white hair which fell to his shoulders and mingled with his heavy, full, patriarchal beard. This would have given him a sufficiently wild appearance, when added to his garb of skins and tattered cloth, but when all was added to his glittering eyes, deep-set beneath shaggy brows, glowing with a red light as he wolfishly tore the food to bits and crushed it between his strong, white teeth, the combination was one that might easily excuse the fright which Andrew Merrydew was plainly feeling.

"Don't—don't bother him, lad!" he huskily

mumbled. "Maybe he'll go away when he gets stuffed!"

So quietly had the stranger entered the camp, that at first Una failed to note his presence, but when her eyes were lifted, she gave a start and uttered a little cry of wondering alarm at that wild, weird vision.

The stranger instantly turned his head at that faint cry, dropping his food and giving vent to a low, inarticulate sound as he caught sight of that fair young face, dimly outlined by the ruddy glow of the camp-fire.

"Don't be alarmed, Una," called out Luther, rising. "He sha'n't harm you while—Steady, stranger!" the last words ringing out in stern warning as the seeming madman rose quickly to his feet, crouching curiously as he moved toward the frightened maiden, muttering:

"An angel? Or—Marian? Is it you, my poor child?"

He stopped short, his muscular figure trembling as with strong emotion, his bare, hairy arms outstretched and his claw-like fingers working as though he longed to grasp the vision and fold it to his heaving breast.

"Marian? My lost love? Is it you—at last, my poor darling!"

The last words were hardly articulate, his voice smothering with powerful emotion as he tremblingly moved nearer to where the maiden sat, spellbound for the moment.

With a sound that might have been a smothered oath, Luther leaped forward, pistol drawn in one hand, the other closing on that bony shoulder, jerking the madman erect and turning him half-way around as he sternly cried:

"Let up, will you, fellow? You're welcome to food, but when it comes to scaring a lady into—"

For a single breath the stranger stared bewilderedly into that darkly handsome face, brushing a bony hand across his eyes; then a change, as sudden as awful, came over him, and with a harsh, snarling cry he caught Luther Merrydew by the arms, heaving him above his head to be dashed downward the next instant with:

"The devil—those evil eyes of Satan! Die, curse you—die!"

Then, instantly, he caught poor Una in his arms and darted away through the night, her pitiful cry for help coming back to cowering Andrew Merrydew.

CHAPTER III.

KNIGHTS OF THE OVERLAND.

DANNY O'TOOLE was handling the ribbons, but with little of his usual airy grace. The sun was hot, the trail rising, he was well ahead of schedule time, with the worst of his "run" behind them. Then, too, he was alone on the box, with none to admire his dashing skill in case he felt called upon to "put on frills."

"Devil blame 'im fer me, sure!" with a nod and quiet grin as he thought of how his latest companion had deserted his side for an inside seat. "He's a foine felly, that same Hoighwater Marrk, wid a kane oye in the hid av 'im whin id comes to a purthy face—an' that same's in beyant, d'ye moind, now?"

And at that precise moment Mark Bywater, leaning easily back in his forward seat, was taking his time to scrutinize the fair face of which gallant Danny O'Toole bore a mental photograph.

Not openly, for Mark was too thorough a gentleman to take such bold advantage of a lady whom destiny had called upon to thus expose herself to admiration; but through his nearly closed lids, just as though heat and fatigue combined had sent him off in a doze.

Just the shadow of a smile flickered about his shapely mouth, for he saw that the fair object of his curiosity was likewise taking notes, her great black eyes scanning his face with an interest which she hardly attempted to disguise.

They had both taken the stage at Paragon City, evidently bound for Peerless Flats in company, if no further, since that was the next station on that line. But Mark Bywater had come from many miles nearer the rising sun, and from her dress, her face, her manner, he judged that this young lady had done much the same.

That wild, rough, newly-opened country did not grow such rare specimens of the human race, as a rule, and it was quite as much in hopes of learning something about the fair traveler as through love of an airy seat that led Mark to win a position beside the driver.

But he made little by that move. Danny O'Toole could tell him nothing concerning the lady, save that she was booked to the end of his run, and down on his way-bill as Mary Jones.

Mark had not met the lady in Paragon City, and only caught a passing glimpse of her rosy, bruné face as she passed him to enter the coach, with a swift, bright glance from those dark orbs; but he felt more than half sure this was not the first time he had encountered those marvelous eyes. And, to satisfy this doubt, he soon after sought a seat inside the stage, giving as an excuse the heat of the sun.

Only to grow more and more bewildered, for while that vague impression deepened bit by bit, he could not turn it into a conviction, though Miss Mary Jones seemed willing enough to enter

into conversation as a means of whiling away that dreary passage through the range.

He was still puzzling over that enigma, when—

"Halt! Hands up and empty, all, or chaw lead!"

"Ow-wow—yis, yer Hanner!" spluttered Danny, rousing from his doze, kicking over the heavy brake and lifting both hands as they tightly gripped the ribbons. "Howld up an' be aisy, ye devils!"

With a lurch that shook up the four passengers after a lively fashion, the coach came to a pause, a faint and feminine scream rising above the creaking of the heavy springs.

"Robbers! save me—oh, save me, dear sir!" gasped Miss Mary Jones, seemingly flung by that shock fairly into the arms of Mark Bywater, and clinging about his neck with hysterical fervor as he instinctively tried to catch a glimpse of what was happening through the open window at one side.

If less completely hampered, he might have witnessed a neat and dextrous bit of work.

Two stout ropes shot across the trail, fencing in the snorting, frightened team. A trimmed tree-trunk shot out to pass through the hind wheels, effectually "locking" them. Two masked figures leaped forward from cover to grip a leader by the bit with one hand, while with the other they covered the obedient driver, revolvers in hand.

Then the author of that sharp challenge stepped into the trail from the bushes, a pistol in each gloved hand, his high-pitched, peculiar voice ringing out sharply:

"Steady inside, you pilgrims! Try to kick up a bobbery, and—Riddle the hearse, lads, at the first crooked sound or motion!"

All this passed with the rapidity of thought, and that grim warning was still ringing through the pass when Mark Bywater succeeded in partially carrying out his first instinct.

Despite those clinging arms and trembling cries, he thrust his head through the window—only to feel a bullet twitch viciously at his close-cropped curls as his perforated hat dropped to the ground.

"Heads inside!" cried the outlaw leader through that curl of blue smoke. "Hang out the white flag first, unless you're hungry for a funeral!"

"Mercy! we surrender!" cried Miss Jones, at the top of a very rich and musical voice, though it grew faint and trembling enough as she murmured: "For my sake, yield! Better lose gold than life!"

Mark Bywater found time to cast a quick glance about him—to see the two other passengers crouching down between the seats, the better to shield their lives, showing no signs of a desire to engage in a desperate battle for their property.

"Open up and spit it out, gentlemen!" came the impatient voice from behind that sable mask. "Shall we give lead for ducats? Last call—ready, lads!"

"Don't shoot—that's a lady in hyar!" cried out one of the other passengers. "We'll come down, boss, like so many white lambs!"

"Then pile out, one at a time and with empty fingers. Show a gun, and down goes your meat-house, for keeps! Pile out—in order."

There was a brief struggle between the two miners to see which one should be the first to obey, and while this was going on, Miss Jones found time to hurriedly implore:

"Do not resist—'twill kill me if harm comes to you, Mark!"

Her dark eyes were all aglow, her red lips so close to his cheek that her warm breath fanned his face. Her fingers were still locked about his neck, and there was more than fright in her tones as she uttered that hasty plea.

With a swift movement Mark Bywater caught her hands and brought them down between them. His blue eyes won a curious light as a half-smile curled his mustached lip.

Almost any other man would have placed a flattering interpretation on that speech, but Mark had seen a good deal of the world for one of his years, and that first dim suspicion grew stronger.

"You know them so well—by instinct, is it, madam?" he said, as their eyes met for an instant.

"Tumble out, the rest of you!" impatiently cried the leader of the road-agents, striding nearer the swinging door. "None of your tricks on travelers, or you'll sup sorrow-sure!"

Miss Jones freed her hands, and with a suppressed sob turned to leave the coach. Mark Bywater followed, still with that curious smile playing about his lips.

"All out, captain," he coolly uttered, taking in the situation at a single keen glance. "Will you kindly pick up my hat?"

"Look out that I don't send your *cabeza* after its thatch!" growled the outlaw, lifting his pistol with a menacing gesture.

"Then may I wait on myself?"

"What the Old Boy are you trying to get through ye?"

"Hands up was the bulletin, and I'm doing

my level best to fill that order. But—the sun's unmercifully hot, and I always did dread a coup. Hence—thanks, madam!" with a profound bow, as Miss Jones snatched up the coveted head-gear and clapped it upon his head. "Charge it to these knights of the Overland, and don't lay it up against my good breeding."

"You're too mighty chipper!" growled the chief, lifting his pistol as though more than half-tempted to send both hat and wearer to earth for good and all. "Do you carry your bank in that dicer?"

"It covers about all I own of value," laughed the free-and-easy sport, facing man and weapon without a trace of flinching. "Thirteen stone of flesh and none, but slave buy as are sea, nowadays, and I fear you'll hardly make your fortune off of poor me."

The chief laughed, short and harshly, as he lowered his weapon.

"You're giving yourself away, my fine fellow. Your tongue runs far too glibly not to have a snug ransom lying back of it. I'll sound your pockets myself after a bit."

"It'll prove a water-haul, captain, or I'm way off in my estimate of your caliber. I'm seeking my fortune, but it's yet to be found."

"So much the worse for you," roughly snapped the chief, turning to his men, some half-score of whose masked figures were now visible. "Hold this gamecock covered, lads, and drill his feathers if he tries to make a break. There's a trick out somewhere, but I reckon I know one worth a dozen of it."

Leaving the four passengers ranged in a row, with hands held over their heads, the outlaw leader turned to the coach, entering it and making a patient and thorough search, no doubt thinking that his prey had attempted to defraud the toll-takers by hiding their valuables before stepping forth from the vehicle.

He used his knife freely, ripping up the leather cushions, exploring every possible hiding-place with a keenness worthy a richer reward; for at the end of half an hour, he came forth, growling like a bear with a sore head, to use the vulgate.

By this time the glowing sun had sunk out of sight, and already that mountain-bordered pass was taking on the dim shades of twilight.

"Start a fire, some of you, lads," growled the chief, sourly. "It's a scaly set we've tackled this bout, and I'll need the light to get at their ducats. But get 'em I will, if I have to hunt with a fine-tooth comb!"

Miss Jones shrunk away from those fiery orbs as they seemed to single her out from the rest, and in her fright seeming to forget that stern order against lowering a hand, she hurriedly snatched a pocketbook from her dress and dropped it at the feet of their captor.

"It's all I have, sir," she said, in unsteady tones, but tugging at her gloves as she added: "My rings, and watch—"

"Don't crowd the mourners, sweetness," chuckled the villain, but stooping to pick up the receptacle. "I'll get around to you in good time, never you worry!"

"But I— May I sit down, good sir?" pleaded the woman, staggering so that her shoulder touched Mark Bywater. "I—I'm really feeling too faint to stand longer!"

As she seemed on the point of sinking to the ground, Mark passed an arm quickly about her waist, supporting her yielding form with ease. Only to have her snatched rudely away by the outlaw chief.

"Hands up, you rascal!" he cried, his pistol fairly touching that pale but fearless face. "Drop them again before I say the word, and up turns your toes for good!"

"Better by bullet than by tongue," coldly retorted Mark, his lip curling with scorn as his blue eyes met that fiery glare coming from behind that sable mask. "Shoot, and give your chin a rest!"

"Don't—don't anger him—for my sake, dear Mark!" impulsively sobbed Miss Jones, breaking free from that rude grasp, only to be caught again before she could reach the younger man.

"Is that the tune, honey-bird?" with a coarse laugh that brought a hot flush to that fair face. "A case of spoons? A happy pair on their honeymoon expedition? Then I reckon I know where to look for this spunky young buck's weasel-skin!"

"Hold, you cur!" flashed Bywater, his hands clinching tightly. "That lady is not my wife; she's no relation to me."

"Then she ought to be, or all signs lie like thunder!"

Swift as thought a hard fist went out, and the jeering rascal went staggering back, to fling up his pistol-hand and fire at Mark's head.

CHAPTER IV.

A FAIR YOUNG AMAZON.

SEEMINGLY only a miracle could save Mark Bywater from instant death, for though reeling under the weight of that swift stroke, the outlaw chief was only a few feet distant, and could hardly miss the size of a human head.

Mark Bywater realized his peril, but it came so swiftly that he had no time to either avert or to answer it in kind. But his time was not yet come, thanks to the last one among all present

from whom such a prompt and bold action might have been expected.

With a choking cry, Miss Jones sprung forward, striking up the revolver even as it exploded, and though the vicious lead cut another hole through the crown of the sport's hat, it wrought no further harm.

Her lithe form came into violent contact with that of the outlaw, completing his downfall, thanks to his already destroyed balance.

He struck on his back, with a shock that sent an explosive grunt from his masked lips, and though he tried to bring his smoking pistol into play, Miss Jones, by a swift, deft kick, sent it spinning from his hand and under the stage.

"Are ye devils, all?" she cried, all signs of timidity lost in hot indignation as she flashed her glowing black eyes over the startled road agents. "Will you stand by and see this miserable rascal do foul murder? I appeal to you—as white men!"

A muttering sound came from their masked lips, and the members shifted their positions uneasily, clearly at a loss just how to act.

"Steady, curse ye all!" snarled the chief, leaping to his feet and backward at the same time, another pistol flashing forth in the red light of the blazing fire as he did so. "I'm chief here, remember!"

"Then show yourself worthy the position, or resign your office to a man!" flashed Miss Jones, warmly, her beautiful face glowing, her glorious eyes gleaming vividly.

"Well, you are a honey!" laughed the villain, lowering his weapon as if in involuntary admiration. "Who'd look for such a tidy bundle of spunk? Do you know, I've a mighty good mind—"

"Then vent it on a man your own size, you cur," coldly interposed Mark Bywater, taking a step forward as he added: "I'm the one you want to deal with, not a defenseless lady."

An oath broke from the outlaw's lips. Miss Jones once more sprung between them. But Mark caught her by the shoulders, gently but firmly swinging her to one side, then folding his arms and smiling coldly as he faced that frowning muzzle, leveled direct at his heart.

"Shoot, and brand yourself a coward, even more deeply than my hand has already marked you."

"You dare—"

A brief, contemptuous laugh cut him short.

"It calls for precious little daring for a man to face a snarling cur that can only snap at an unguarded heel. Only for the ruffians at your back, you'd turn tail and flee with a howl of terror."

It was a bold, even reckless action on the part of a single man, seemingly without arms other than those nature had given him at birth, but Mark Bywater was acting as he deemed the wisest.

He knew that he had already forfeited his life, according to the road-agent code, when he had lifted a hand against the chief. He knew that the surest way to invite punishment was to cringe and show regret for that bold action. At the worst he could only be shot down, and he might possibly shame the outlaw into showing both himself and the woman to whom he almost surely owed a life some outward respect.

An ugly muttering broke from the road-agents, and one of them called out, impatiently:

"Shell we riddle him, boss?"

"Leave him to me," sharply uttered the chief, lifting a hand and making a swift gesture as of command. "Now—what do you want?"

"As much of the earth as I can get," was the prompt response.

"You're sure of six feet by two, anyway!" grimly laughed the chief. "And I'll not charge you a cent for the title-deeds, either!"

"You'll take my measure by foul means, of course?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Business, pure and simple," was the reply. "Swear that you'll hold this lady and these two gentlemen harmless for what I do, and I'll agree to clean out your whole gang, with you at their head!"

The words read like a bit of gasconade, but, when uttered in that cold, business-like tone, backed by that white, resolute face, they sounded vastly different. And even the chief seemed to accept them as genuine, visibly recoiling as he lifted his pistol-hand once more.

"Up with your hands, or I'll blow you through, Mark Bywater!" he cried, sternly.

"Shoot him, and I'll send you to act as his servant through the Valley!" cried a clear, mellow voice.

And Miss Jones sprung back from the stage, from beneath which she had caught up the pistol kicked from the outlaw's hand a few minutes earlier.

No one had noticed her movements, so interested were all in the outcome of that verbal duel, and her speech seemed to paralyze both the chief and his henchmen.

Mark Bywater saw his chance, but before he could improve it a rope shot out from the bushes behind him, a noose dropping over his head and shoulders. Then, with a heavy jar, he was jerked backward to the earth.

"On him, ye devils!" screamed the chief, ducking low and leaping toward Miss Jones, her single shot passing harmlessly over his head.

The next instant both were secured. Half a dozen burly rascals piled upon Mark, securely pinioning him, while their leader quickly disarmed Miss Mary.

"Don't quite kill the rascal!" he called out in sharp warning to his men, as he completed his own capture. "He wouldn't fight so brash unless his feathers were of pure gold!"

Through all this Danny O'Toole had kept his seat on the box, placidly waiting for the end, understanding well enough that his own life was safe so long as he obeyed orders.

Road-agents only fire a shot when absolutely compelled to do so, knowing that one driver often while in the discharge of his duty means a score others dropping off for less risky pursuits.

I or did either of the two miners attempt to escape, though they might possibly have done so under cover of the confusion. But they had little to lose, in the way of gold, and life was dear.

"You're wise, pard," laughed the chief, as he noted their meek attitude, when he had disarmed Miss Jones. "I really looked to see you make a break for the brush, or else chip in to help yonder hothead."

"'Twasn't none o' our picnic, boss," resignedly said one of them.

"An' the reek counted up heap sight taller'n our pockets," nodded the other, with a half sigh.

"Lucky you thought so, for I'm not a man to face my entire hand when it isn't called for. I've got men planted under cover able and willing to sink a drift through a dozen, if so many should try to jump the game before I call the last turn."

Mark Bywater was bound, hand and foot, but his captors lifted him to his feet, supporting his back against a friendly boulder just at the edge of the bushes, leaving him standing thus, though still remaining near enough to renew their grip at a sign from their master.

"Good enough!" nodded the chief in approval of their work. "He's had his crow out, and we'll help him mount presently. Driver!"

"Yis, yer Hanner!" promptly answered Danny O'Toole.

"You've acted like a wise man thus far; see if you can keep it up to the end. Drop those ribbons and pitch down that treasure-box!"

"Sure, yer Hanner, I w'u'd av I c'u'd, but av I c'u'dn't how c'u'd I!" dolefully whined the Milesian, his frost-bitten visage growing still more puckered than ordinary.

Swiftly the outlaw covered him with a revolver, crying sternly:

"No chin-music! Pitch down that box!"

"Divil a box I've got wid me the noight, sor," whined Danny, shivering and shrinking from that ugly muzzle. "Av the mail-bags 'll do, sor, it's me that'll shplit woide opin wid the jye av sindin' them down the way, sor. Bud the box—"

"Up and take a look, one of you!" viciously growled the outlaw.

He seemed to doubt the word of the driver, but a hasty yet thorough search proved Danny in the right. The mail was tossed down, but there was no sign of a treasure-box such as the agents had clearly counted upon capturing.

With an imprecation, the chief bade his fellows stow away the letter-bags for future examination, then turned his attention to the passengers, searching them in turn with his own hands by the ruddy glow of the freshened fire.

But scanty pay rewarded his search, so far as the two miners were concerned, and in evident disgust he left them with a lusty kick each.

"Next time line your pockets better, or walk instead of riding. Of all things I do detest a beggar on horseback—or in a hearse," he added, by way of warning, as he passed on to Mark Bywater.

"Your turn, my lusty gamecock," he laughed, with his gloved hand lightly tweaking the captive's nose. "Now we'll see what wonderful treasure you were defending at the risk of your precious life."

There was no answer, but those steel-blue eyes glowed with a dangerous light that told the outlaw he must pay heavily for his insult if ever they were to meet on anything like equal footing.

With scant attention to this silent vow, the road-agent deftly and thoroughly searched his prisoner, finding little difficulty in so doing, thanks to the care with which his rascals had applied their bonds. Not a pocket or a likely hiding-place about his clothes had been crossed by the lasso, and the search was soon over.

"Not enough to pay for the ammunition!" snarled the robber, in evident disgust at the small amount of plunder thus obtained. "Are you a traveling fraud, as I took you from the first?"

"You ought to be a good judge, but men rarely know themselves as well as others know them," retorted Mark.

"You'll know me better before the end, may-

" snarled the ruffian, as he passed on to where Miss Mary Jones stood, shrinkingly waiting the end.

" I have no more money, sir," she hastened to say, as he drew closer. " I gave you every dollar I owned, at first. As for my rings and watch, they are here."

She held out a trembling hand with the jewelry lying in its little palm. The ornaments were taken and slipped into a handy pocket, but the outlaw retained her hand in his firm grasp, laughing softly as he bent his cowed head over it.

" Kiss that which smites thee, or words to that effect, sweetness," he said, as his bearded lips touched her rosy palm.

With a low cry, the woman shrunk back, trying to disengage her hand, but vainly.

" Are there two of you, honey-bird?" mocked the villain, amused by her feeble struggles. " Only a bit ago you were a valiant young Amazon, bravest of the brave, ready to pour out fire and brimstone upon my devoted head because I chanced to frown upon your—not husband, then?"

" You heard him—no, he is nothing to me," came the faint reply.

" It's not your fault, then, I'm open to bet. But that don't count. Time presses and there's a long road in front of us. Do your work, my gallant lads!"

Several of the men leaped forward and began cutting the harness to bits with keen blades, while their chief addressed Danny O'Toole:

" If anybody asks you how came ye so, driver, bid them take the next hearse this way, and I'll introduce myself to their notice. Good-night!"

" Then—we are at liberty to go, now?" timidly ventured Miss Jones, seemingly wholly cowed by that recent speech from those masked lips.

" Yes—as my honored guests, you and Bywater," laughed the chief.

CHAPTER V.

THE KING OF THE MOUNTAINS.

HELPLESS as an infant in the grip of those bony hands, Una Freestone was swung aloft to rest against the shoulder of the seeming madman as he passed from the fire-lit circle and darted away through the night.

Shrill and piercing rung out her cry for help, but, even as the appeal passed her lips, she seemed to realize the utter absence of hope.

She had seen Luther Merrydew caught up in those mighty arms, to be cast down upon the ground with fearful force. She had seen his father blanched with fear and trembling like a leaf as he cowered from that repulsive creature, and she knew that no help could come from either.

One vain, frantic struggle to free herself from that insane clutch—then a blinding glare seemed to flash before her eyes and she lost all consciousness for the time being.

Unheeding, if he realized this, the wild man darted along through the gloom, seemingly guided by instinct rather than eyesight, for, rough as grew the way, he made no trip, he encountered no obstacle through which his powerful limbs could not force a way or over which he could not leap without breaking his mighty stride.

Strange sounds escaped his lips: growls of deepest rage, of venomous hatred against some being or beings as yet unnamed; brief breaks of laughter sounding scarcely less terrible; varied now and again by gentle notes, such as a loving parent or doting lover might lavish upon an idolized one.

How long that mad flight lasted, or how far she was borne in those hairy arms, Una Freestone never fully realized, but when her senses at length returned to her, the wild man of the mountains was squatting down beside her, as she lay upon a rocky ledge in the clear moonlight.

Her face was damp, her unbound hair was dripping with moisture, and as she lay like one just waking from a dream, the maiden knew that this wild creature was bathing her brows with a wet rag, sobbing and moaning like one whose heart was breaking.

" Waken—oh, will you never more waken, darling? Have I found you but to lose you? Have those devils— Ha!" his tones abruptly changing and his bony hands shooting up to madly claw the air above her. " Down—down to the lowest pit of Tophet, Satan! Down, to feed the eternal fires which— Those eyes! those evil eyes!"

His fierce voice broke. He shrunk back, his head partly averted, his quivering hands flung out as in aversion, even while his sunken eyes seemed held by some hideous fascination exercised by that object of curiously blended fear, hatred, revenge and attraction.

" Satan's eyes! The devilishly beautiful eyes which lured my poor little woman to her eternal destruction! Shut them—close their lids—hide that baleful light forever! Quench their gleam, oh, angels of mercy, lest still other pure souls be drawn—"

Almost involuntarily Una Freestone uttered a gasping cry and sought to regain her feet to seek safety in flight, for as yet she only realized

that this grim monster had torn her from her guardian: to gain what ends her bewildered brain had not as yet attempted to divine.

Instantly those bony fingers were fastened upon her arms, lifting her shrinking figure from the rocks until her fear-blanchéd face was brought close to that hairy visage.

" Mercy—don't hurt me, please!" the poor girl gasped, her lids closing and her brain beginning to whirl before that wild, almost wolfish gaze.

" Who— You're not my little lady?" hoarsely panted the madman, his strong features working spasmodically, his sunken eyes all aglow with mingled doubt, hope and rage as they scanned that fair face by the pale light of the silver moon.

" No—I'm only— Pray let me go!"

" Whither, my little white dove? Back to those devils? Back to singe your fair plumage in the evil heat of those— It's a lie!" and his voice grew harsh and fierce once more, his lion-like mane tossing back as he glared out at vacancy with eyes afame. " They're not eyes! They're loopholes cut through the walls of hell, by Satan's hands, to attract silly moths of the human race to eternal ruin!"

" Pity—you hurt me!" faintly gasped Una, as those sinewy fingers tightened upon her arms until it seemed as though their tips must meet through cloth and flesh alike.

" Pity—ay! the pity of it, as you justly remark, fair lady," the strange being uttered, all show of excitement vanishing, his voice growing soft and melancholy as his fierce grip relaxed. " And the worst of all lies in the mournful fact that I am powerless to remedy the atrocious evil. Not, mind you, that I lack the will, but because I'm— Hist!" a finger tapping his silver-bearded lips as his glittering eyes cast a swift, wary glance around them.

" The air is full of little imps, each one bound to catch and carry every whisper direct to the evil ears of their master. And, though I'm still a king—king by every right, both human and divine— Ha!" his unsettled wits flying off at a tangent once more. " Why don't you bow your head in admission that I am really your sovereign? Are you, too, one of the treacherous? Do you deny that I'm still King of the Mountains?"

The poor, frightened girl shrunk as far away as that merciless grip would permit, suffering almost worse than death as she began to realize into what clutches she had fallen.

A madman, beyond a doubt! And though his brain might have been turned by cruel injustice; though he might, while sane, have been a man among men, incapable of wronging the innocent and helpless; yet the terrible fact remained that he was unaccountable for his actions now.

She knew that a single breath of insane frenzy might end her life in spite of all her feeble strength could do, and feeling that terrible grip tighten, she faintly gasped:

" I will—I do, your Majesty!"

" It's a fair face," muttered the King of the Mountains, scanning the features before him, his grip relaxing, yet holding the poor girl helpless. " A fair and a truthful face, by my crown! And yet—it seems familiar, though I fail to place it distinctly. Your title, fair maid o' the nut-brown locks?"

" Una—Una Freestone," with difficulty answered his captive, though she made desperate efforts to gather her wits and courage to fall in with his fantastic humor, as the one frail hope of escaping death or mutilation at those irresponsible hands.

" Not—it isn't Marian?" heaving a deep sigh as he answered his own query. " No, it's never Marian—it never will be Marian, though I seek and search and pray and cling to hope through all to the crack o' doom! Because—it's a lie, foul as the vile lips through which the words first issued!" he cried, harshly, once more clawing the air with curved fingers that seemed in the act of closing about the throat of a hated enemy.

" She is not dead! She is waiting and watching for my coming—and I've lost my way!" his voice choking with almost childish grief and despair as he turned his softened gaze once more upon his terrified captive. " I've lost my way, and the poor little lady will die of grief and suspense unless— Can you show me the way, dear lady?"

" Back there—the fire," panted Una, faintly catching at the seeming hope, only to close her eyes with a shivering moan as the King of the Mountains laughed mockingly in her face.

" Back yonder, where the devil is lying in wait behind his battery? The devil who— Did I not see two of them?" slowly brushing a hand across his eyes as though to clear his misty memory. " Two—and each one more venomous than the other! Two—and a scaly tail writhing behind each? A rattlesnake and a copperhead? Ay! I scent them even now!" his eyes flashing anew, as he tossed back his tangled mane and swept the surrounding shadows with glowing gaze.

" Evil, poisonous serpents were they, though to mortal eyes they may have worn the human shape. Did they, to you, fair maid? Could you look into their evil eyes and not detect the simple truth?"

" Take me back—let me go, I pray you, sir!" moaned the terrified maiden, hardly conscious of her own speech, but feeling that a few minutes longer of this horrible captivity must surely kill or drive her as mad as the King of the Mountains himself.

" Take you back to those devils, poor innocent? Take you back to meet a fate ten thousand times worse than death? I'd be mad, indeed, to work you such hideous evil, little white dove; and I'm not mad—they lie in their throats who dare to even hint as much!"

He broke off abruptly, his eyes settling on a clump of bushes below the ledge, his tall form slowly settling lower, his bony right hand stealing out to rest upon a ragged fragment of rock lying hard by.

Then, with a wild, mocking laugh, the giant leaped to his feet and hurled the boulder down into the covert with ferocious energy.

An instant later a scream of horrible agony rent the night air, coming from the center of those bushes.

CHAPTER VI.

TRAILING A MADMAN.

" HOLY smokel will ye listen to that?"

Telescope Charley stopped short in his tracks as a faint, frightened scream came floating through the night air to his ears, and Pritty Poll stumbled up against him in the gloom.

" Hear be durned! Raised in the woods to be skeered at a screech-owl, was ye, critter?"

" Waal, ef it was, it was, but if it was, I'll be blamed ef it was!" spluttered the tall camp-cook, whose tongue seemed as unruly as his gangling frame in moments of excitement.

" That come from a two-legged owl, an'—"

" That does settle it, fer I never yit see'd a owl with less'n a round dozen laigs," scoffed his partner, pushing past the cook and resuming their interrupted journey through the gloom.

" Laigs or no laigs, that screech come from the gal!" doggedly declared Charley, snatching up the bundle of battered cooking utensils which he had dropped in that first moment of excitement. " Ef I cain't tell a gal's whoop from a owl's holler, then I don't want a red cent fer nothin'—I don't!"

" Waal, what of it?" snarled Poll. " Ain't the old man thar? An' ain't the young boss thar? An' wouldn't we be durned fools fer to bu'st our necks all to— What's that?"

A wild, maniacal peal of laughter came drifting through the night, and Pritty Poll imitated the abrupt stop of his mate a few moments before.

" Screech-owl, fer sure," grinned the Telescope. " Raised in the woods fer to be skeered at a hooter, was ye? Waal, waal, who'd a' thunk it?"

Pritty Poll did not seem to hear, but set off at a run for camp, a dim gleam of which just then became visible.

Telescope Charley was by his side as they burst into the little glade near the purling brook, and both paused abruptly with ejaculations of amazement at what lay before them.

Luther Merrydew was sitting near the fire, just where he had fallen. He seemed dazed, and but half conscious, but when the two men came forward, he staggered to his feet.

Andrew Merrydew crouched in the edge of the camp-glow, the picture of terror, though he quickly rallied as he recognized his men, crying:

" Save her—save Miss Una from that devil in human shape!"

" Who, an' what, and how come it?" sharply demanded Pritty Poll, dropping his share of the plunder recovered from the canyon and drawing a revolver as his little red eyes flashed about them. " In a word, boss!"

Telescope, more practical, leaped forward and thrust the open neck of a whisky flask between those fear-blanchéd lips, and after a quick draught, the elder Merrydew recovered sufficiently to explain.

He told a fairly straight story, though his fears magnified the wild creature into a giant such as no modern eyes ever gazed upon; but his auditors were men shrewd enough to make all due allowance, and when once in possession of the main facts, they showed no reluctance about taking the trail of that fabulous monster.

" Bring her back—alive!" panted Merrydew, rising to stagger over to where his son still lay. " Bring her back, and I'll break your hands with gold!"

" Bet we jest will, boss!" grimly returned Pritty Poll.

" Got to, or the cake's all dough!" added Charley, Winchester in hand, as he caught up a chunk of bread and a bit of cold meat before plunging through the bushes upon the trail of the nondescript and its captive.

Poll quickly joined his hungry mate, and neither showed the slightest indecision as to the proper course to pursue, though the darkness in that valley was too great for the unaided eye to pick up a human trail.

Andrew Merrydew had pointed out the course taken by the madman, and with that clew, the rest was not difficult, at first.

Thanks to the lay of the ground, the madman could hardly have turned aside on either hand

while near the camp, unless he was gifted with the limbs of a mountain goat.

"An' when we come to the turn, reckon a few matches 'll p'int out the right line," volunteered Poll.

"Got to," mumbled Charley, through a huge mouthful of mixed bread and meat. "What'll the boss say ef we don't ketch her?"

"Not a durn word to me," grunted Poll, as he pressed through a line of shrubbery where its stunted boughs showed broken and splintered as though some wild beast had crashed through it at blind speed. "Fer I'll be som'ers else jest 'bout that time—I will!"

"Mighty right, too! 'Splosion ain't nothin' to what!"

The guide seemed to understand that rather enigmatical expression, for he made no reply or comment, pressing on like a sure-nosed hound along a breast-high scent.

Charley, still busied with his hasty lunch, fell a little to the rear, seemingly content to let his mate take the initiative, for the time being. Neither trailer anticipated a speedy overhauling of their prey, though their trained senses kept a mechanical watch on all sides as they pressed along, eager to reach the first point in the gulch at which the madman might be expected to have turned aside from a direct course.

This was something over a mile from the camp, and when it was gained, Poll struck a match and ignited a bunch of dry grass which he had plucked up and twisted tightly while hastening along.

By the aid of this rude torch, he began scrutinizing the ground, just here moistened by the division of the little stream, giving a surface that could not be bettered for their purpose.

"Straight on, an' I ain't a heap sorry, nuther!" chuckled the red-haired trailer as he noted the huge tracks leading directly across the damp ground. "It'll give us a straight run of nigh 'nother mile, anyway, 'fore it doubles."

"But they won't be no wet up thar—wu'ss luck!" grunted Charley, rising from beside the brook, at which he had been washing down the last mouthful of bread and meat. "Ef he does double—"

"Kiver, you!" grated Poll, dropping the grass-torch into the water as a sound came to his ears from the rear. "Somebody's afoot!"

But hardly had the two trailers plunged into the nearest bushes with weapons ready for use in case of need, than a familiar voice hailed them from down the gulch:

"Steady, lads! Save your powder for that mad devil!"

"It's you, boss?" ventured Pritty Poll.

"Look for yourself," was the prompt response as a match flared up and cast its yellow glow over the pale, soiled face of Luther Merrydew. "What have you found there?"

"Toes p'nted direck up the ditch, boss."

"Then skin out—lively, or I'll run over you both!"

The two men obeyed, and with Luther Merrydew close at their heels, they made remarkable time between the two points where an examination by torchlight was deemed essential to success in their pursuit.

This time the task was far more difficult, and each of the trio held a light, straining their eyes to discover a clew by which they might know whether the madman had turned with his captive.

The soil was dry and full of gravel, at places almost as unimpressible as though formed of a solid rock floor; but at least two of the three were old and skilled trailers, and at the end of an anxious quarter of an hour, Telescope Charley gave a low ejaculation that announced the broken trail had been joined aright.

"He's struck out this way, boss," muttered the gangling scout, holding his torch so that the others could read the "sign" for themselves.

"I'd heap sight ruther 'twas t'other, for in a weenty bit he'll hev the hull pesky range fer to spraddle hisself all over—he jest will!"

"We'll find him, if it takes a year!" sternly muttered Merrydew, dropping his nearly consumed torch and pressing on up the side gulch.

"Then you reckon—'twasn't the boss?" hesitated Pritty Poll, who followed him closest.

"'Twas the devil himself!"

Savagely came the answer, and Poll prudently dropped back a yard or two, just in time to catch a guarded murmur from Telescope Charley:

"Mought be so, an' yit not let the boss clean out—eh, pard?"

"Tell him so, ef ye like, mate," with a backward grin that sufficiently pointed his remark for Telescope Charley's comprehension.

This side-gulch rapidly grew shallower, and a few minutes later their leader came to a halt, gazing around him by the light of the moon, which showed his face pale and stern-set.

All around them lay a perfect wilderness of stones and rocks and huge boulders, forming a tract over which an army might have made its way with hardly a clew left behind to guide the keenest eye in pursuit.

"It's blind luck now!" harshly muttered Merrydew, starting ahead with dogged vigor. "We can't leave Miss Freestone all night in the clutches of that demon! We must stumble upon them!"

"An' that's jest what—a clean stumble!" muttered Poll, in a muffled note of disgust at the unpromising prospect before them.

For fully an hour they pressed on, turning and winding as the lay of the ground seemed most favorable, without other hint or sign to guide them in that blind quest. And yet, fortune seemed to be on their side, for Luther Merrydew paused abruptly, with a glad cry, as his right hand shot out to guide the eyes of his men.

"Yonder! on the ledge! Isn't that—the devil, by all that's holy!" he panted, hardly able to pronounce the words of exultation.

"An' that's the angel, too!" chuckled Poll, as another figure seemed blended with that of the object first noticed. "Reckon the ole boss'll hev to test his weasel-skin a-breakin' the two hands o' us—eh, Charley, pard?"

"Shell I draw out the check, boss?" grinned the lank scout, lifting the hammer of his Winchester. "'Tain't quite sech a cl'ar light as a critter'd pick fer choice to make a shot that calls fer a pile o' yaller boys, but I kin do it—bet I kin, now!"

But Luther Merrydew caught his arm, checking the rifle as it rose to a level, muttering hurriedly:

"Hold! don't risk it, man! Can't you see—"

"I could, then, but she's riz up higher—wuss luck me!" growled the disappointed marksman.

It was when the King of the Mountains raised Una up before him to more closely scan the fair face which seemed to waken such dim yet painful doubts in his mist-veiled brain. Not even the keenest eye and steadiest hand could direct a bullet through that dim light with any certainty of killing only the guilty, and eager as Telescope Charley was to win the golden reward, he admitted as much.

"He hasn't spotted us," hastily muttered Merrydew, sinking lower and moving cautiously away under cover of the friendly rocks. "We can creep closer, over yonder. I located a patch of brush within short pistol range, and if we once get there before the demon moves off, he's our man!"

The two trailers silently followed the lead of the young man, apparently regarding him as a superior from the unquestioning obedience they yielded him, and before many more minutes had passed the coveted cover was gained.

Breathlessly Luther parted that leafy screen, to see the tall, athletic figure of the madman plainly revealed, seemingly wholly at their mercy. But then, with a terrible laugh, the King of the Mountains leaped up, to hurl a heavy stone downward and draw from tortured lips that yell of horrible agony!

CHAPTER VII.

"A BULLET OR A BRIDE!"

MISS MARY JONES shrunk back with a trembling cry as she seemed to read the truth, more from those glowing eyes and that mocking laugh than from the words spoken by the outlaw.

"You don't—I'd sooner meet death!" she panted, but with only a feeble show of her recent courage.

"In my arms then, sweetheart," laughed the villain, suddenly catching the woman, seemingly more amused than alarmed or provoked by her cries and her vain struggles to escape.

Mark Bywater forgot his recent suspicions, only remembering that a woman was in dire peril, and, bound though he was, strove to rescue her from that evil grip. And even after his hampered limbs flung him heavily to the ground he did all that lay in his power, appealing to Danny O'Toole and the two miners.

"Are ye dogs that you stand by and witness such a foul outrage without even lifting a finger or uttering a word in protest? Bounce that demon, and if you can't save the poor girl, at least show that you haven't forgotten the mother who bore ye!"

"Try it on, gents, and you'll forget all that, I'll go bail!" the reckless outlaw chuckled with vicious meaning.

"It's a durned shame, but what kin we do, boss?" muttered one of the miners, sullenly. "They'd make sifters out o' us—too quick!"

"Mighty right," Johnny Level-pate, nodded the chief, with an added whistle that brought another masked figure to his side in swift obedience. "The lads are thirsty this evening, and since gold is lacking, they'd just jump at the chance to fill up on blood."

"Name your figures, and I'll stand good for her ransom," said Mark Bywater, ceasing his worse than vain struggles and steady his voice.

"What is the lady to you, that you're so mighty anxious?"

"She is a lady. Beyond that—nothing more to me than to any other white man. Name your figures, and permit her to go with the stage. If it's gold you're after, I'm better able to glut you than she is."

"That's mighty good news, though I'll have trouble in making you look at it in the same light. All the same—take her, my man!"

But it was into the arms of his summoned satellite that the chief tossed his fair burden,

laughing lightly as Miss Jones gave a despairing cry, then seemed to sink into a swoon.

A wave of his hand sent the fellow hurrying off out of the firelight with his limp and unresisting burden.

"Button up, High-Water Mark!" the head scoundrel growled, as he strode over to where the helpless man lay on the stones, lifting a foot and shaking it menacingly above those lips as though to wipe out the protests as quickly as formed. "You'll have all you can do to pay your own fare out, without bothering your head over strangers. If she was your wife, now—"

He paused abruptly, his eyes glowing vividly through the holes in his black hood as he bent lower, evidently trying to surprise the whole truth in that pale face below.

"I have no wife," came the even response. "If I had—if the lady had been wife or relative of mine—you would never have taken either of us alive."

"Your betrothed, then?" persisted the chief, seemingly peculiarly anxious on that point; but, even here, he was given scant reward.

Just then the clatter of a horse's hoofs rung out, causing the passengers to start and brighten up; only to lose hope as rapidly. The clatter receded instead of approached, and the outlaw chief said:

"Don't ye think it, gentlemen. That's my good lad escorting the spunky little lady to—Well, if you know nothing, you'll tell less lies! Danny O'Toole!"

"Yis, sir, yer Hanner!"

"Keep your perch until you can count five hundred after you lose sight of our charming procession. Then you can patch up and push on for the Flats. And—Danny?"

"Yer Hanner?"

"Tell your boss to charge all damage to Prince Lucifer."

"Yis, sor, yer Hanner—long loife to the l'ave o' ye!"

"Accepted for what it's worth, Danny. Now, lads, get down to business. We've cut enough time to waste already!"

The outlaws swiftly completed their work of destruction, leaving but a slim prospect for Danny O'Toole's ever getting his "hearse" safely to its destination without procuring a new set of harness. Then they caught up the bound form of Mark Bywater, carrying him out of the trail, through the shrubbery, on to where others of their number were busily preparing horses for the night ride.

"Do you understand the full meaning of a parole of honor, Mr. Bywater?" asked Prince Lucifer—to give him his chosen title—as his henchmen placed their prisoner squarely upon his feet.

"Not in connection with a thorough cur, such as you have this night proved yourself!" flashed the young man.

"Which means that you prefer riding in bonds to taking free comfort for an hour or two?"

"I'll neither ask nor accept a favor at your hands. Turn me free, without conditions, and I'll thrash you out of your stolen boots, then give you a parole; but, until I've paid you off, I'm dumb."

"Dumb goes, then. Rig him out, lads, for the moon is crawling high, and there remains a heap o' work yet to be accomplished."

Two burly rascals gripped Bywater by the arms, holding him securely while another freed his lower limbs from his bonds, only to catch him up and place him astride a saddled horse, after which his ankles were tied together by a strong rope.

Another was arranged to bind him fast to the high-horned saddle, rendering it impossible for him to lose his seat, either through accident or intentionally.

"You've only yourself to thank for this, my dear fellow," coldly said Prince Lucifer, riding alongside on a spirited horse. "If you had given me your word of honor—"

"Will none of you rascals take pity and plug up my ears? Death's all right, but to be talked out of existence—and by a cur who's fed all his life on carrion—ugh!" shivered Mark, disgustedly.

Lucifer forced a laugh, but touched his steed with the spur and rode on in advance, his men compelling their captive to follow hard at his heels.

The course they took led them almost directly away from the stage-trail, and they seemed pressing right into the heart of the range, regardless of the growing wildness.

Left the use of his eyes and his ears, Mark made the best possible use of them, though he heard nothing and saw little that promised to be of future use to him.

He soon learned that Miss Jones was not with that party, and this fact served to waken that dim, hazy suspicion born in the first moments of the attack on the stage.

Who and what was she? Could it be possible that she was, in some strange manner, connected with this evil gang? Had all her actions been premeditated and prearranged?

It seemed a wildly preposterous fancy, but, try as he might, Mark Bywater could not con-

vince himself that his suspicions were wholly without foundation.

"Is it more than a stroke for a snug ransom? Is he carrying me all this way simply to take revenge for the blow I gave him? Or—is that accursed treasure at the bottom of it all?"

These thoughts filled the busy brain of the prisoner as he was hurried along through the night, and though he tried to bring order out of chaos, though he strove to answer his own silent queries, he failed.

For some time he kept count of the various turns and crooks made by his captors, forced out of a direct route by the nature of that rough, broken region; but soon even his keen wits grew confused, and he abandoned the attempt to make a chart of their course for possible use in the time to come.

For hour after hour that hard journey lasted, all the time with their animals pressed to as great speed as was practicable; but as all things mundane must have an end, so this wild ride found a period.

Directly at the foot of a towering cliff which seemed to shut off all further progress in that direction, but as the night-riders showed no signs of annoyance, Mark Bywater felt assured that they had not gone astray. Prince Lucifer drew up beside him, with:

"How goes it, dear fellow? Any questions to ask?"

"If you're spoiling for one: what comes next?"

"A wedding or a funeral, High-water Mark?" with sudden viciousness in eyes and voice as his gloved hand tightly gripped an arm of his prisoner. "Take your choice between life and death—between a collar of plump warm arms, or a necklace of hemp—between a bride or a bullet, Mark Bywater!"

CHAPTER VIII.

LUCIFER TAKES A FALL.

"UNsIGHT, unseen, eh?" drawled the prisoner, with mock dismay. "I must trust to luck as to those same arms proving white, red or black! It would strain you too mighty bad to cast just a spark more light on this deeply interesting subject, Captain Cut-throat?"

"Light enough, and yonder comes the first!" laughed Lucifer as his fierce grip slackened and his gloved hand rose to point out a red, star-like spot high up the cliff. "All's well, my lads, and we'll soon be at home!"

He swung himself out of the saddle at his words, resigning his steed to a man who sprung forward for that office. And at a word further from their chief the outlaws quickly released Mark Bywater from his cramped position in the saddle.

"Touch lightly, rascals," he muttered, leaning heavily against one of the road-agents, catching his breath involuntarily as the interrupted circulation sent a stinging thrill through his lower limbs. "Some thief has stolen my legs and replaced them with—Is it against the law to laugh?"

"Let him sit down. Rub his legs, some of you. The expectant bride might fancy her jewel drunk," laughed Lucifer, seeming in high spirits.

"Haven't felt so miserably happy since—Leave a patch of hide for my legs to swear by, please!" gasped Mark, as the warm blood shot tingling through his veins.

While this was taking place the road-agents all dismounted, half of their number leading all the horses away, seeming to vanish into the solid rock only a few rods away, though, from the shape of the steep hill directly opposite, Mark reasoned that but for the intense gloom which reigned over that narrow gulch, he could have noted a sharp turn in the pass around which the outlaws filed.

After a few minutes spent by the road-agents in rubbing his legs, Mark declared his cure perfected, and proved it by lightly springing to his feet. But if he had any wild hope of escaping by a sudden dash into the darkness, bound though his arms were, it was frustrated by the prompt action of Prince Lucifer, whose strong fingers instantly closed upon the arm of his enforced guest.

"Cool and easy, dear fellow," came his purring notes, even more repulsive than his shrill voice which, real or assumed, had marked his first appearance that night. "I can understand your impatience to meet and greet your destined bride, but, having waited so long, she will not die if her suspense be yet a little longer drawn out."

"Still harping on my daughter, eh?" with a sneer.

"What do you—Ah! a quotation, is it?" with a forced laugh that only thinly disguised his start of angry suspicion.

"Just a random shaft," laughed his prisoner. "Sorry if it pricked you, old rascal, but I didn't fashion your armor."

"Look out that you don't fashion a rough necktie for yourself!" and Lucifer gave Mark a rude shove that sent him into the grip of a couple of stout fellows, himself leading the way through the gloom along a narrow, winding trail that afforded uncertain means of scaling the high cliff.

Prudently trusting himself to the guidance of his escort, and at the same time forcing them to half-drag, half-push him up the steep trail, Mark Bywater at length stepped out upon a fairly broad and level ledge of rock, lighted up by a couple of cheerily-blazing fires, evidently kindled by the same hands which had hung out that light of welcome a short time before.

He cast a swift, comprehensive glance around him, but saw little to repay the effort.

Only that natural shelf, with a cliff rising above, a precipice falling below. A number of cowl and disguised figures, among which he had no difficulty in recognizing the burly, almost clumsy shape of the man who had called himself Prince Lucifer.

The inner edge of the ledge was fairly fringed with stunted shrubbery and vines, some of the latter climbing so high as to be lost in the gloom reigning above the ruddy line of light cast upward by the two fires.

Hardly without reasoning he had looked for the entrance to a cave or cavern of some sort, but if that rock wall contained any such, the opening was thoroughly masked by the bushes and vines.

Mark's two guards silently forced him along until he stood nearly midway between the two fires, then paused, waiting in grim silence for further instructions.

Lucifer also was silent, but evidently his men understood what was expected of them, for while a number stationed themselves near the head of the winding path coming up from the gulch, others passed by the prisoner to station themselves beyond, all with weapons convenient to their hands.

When this was arranged, Prince Lucifer came forward, his two guards falling back in obedience to a wave of his hand.

"Now, Mr. Mark Bywater, I want a few words with and from you," began the outlaw chief, only to be bluntly interrupted.

"Mighty few they'll be, so far as my lips are concerned, Captain Cut-throat. Just enough to let you understand that my tongue and hands pull together; both free, or both bound."

"You mean—"

"That I'm white and free-born. That you may hold my body in your power, to use or abuse as the Devil, your master, tempts you. But my tongue—that is my own, to wag or lock fast as it likes me."

"Or mine to pull out by the roots!"

"Look out for my teeth while catching hold, Captain Cut-throat! I'd rather bite a buzzard, but it couldn't do worse than kill me."

An ugly oath came from behind that sable cowl in answer to the reckless laugh with which Mark emphasized his words, but, before Lucifer could follow it up with words or action, the captive sport abruptly altered his demeanor, his voice ringing out bold and distinct:

"Threat for threat, but now business goes. I'll talk a streak if you like it that way, but only on condition that you free my hands. Refuse, and you may do your worst: my jaws are locked."

"Are you so foolhardy as to ever think of escaping?" with a sneer, though he still hesitated to yield. "Look about you, man! A round score, all armed, all sure shots, each and every one among them. Before you could make a second leap you would be too full of holes to ever hold water!"

"Then why do you shrink from setting my hands at liberty? Do you fear I'll grip and choke the foul life out of you in that one second of grace? If so—call the trade off, and talk for both sides your own sweet self."

Mark Bywater turned his back on the outlaw chief, simulating a yawn as he looked about like one seeking a fairly comfortable couch for the rest of the night.

"So be it, then!" growled the Prince, flashing forth a knife and, with a single slash, the ropes dropped asunder. "If you are idiot enough to kick up a row, so much the worse for yourself!"

"That's more like it; but you're a clumsy lout after all, my gentle foot-pad," lightly mocked High-water Mark, as he rubbed his wrists and worked the muscles of his arms, so long kept in a cramped position. "Since you had to yield, why not do it with a little more grace? Why not brace up and have a bit of style about you? Now—I'm open to lay odds every man-jack of your cut-throats are grinning at their master this holy minute!"

"Chaff on while you may, young fellow," growled Lucifer. "My time is coming, and then—"

"Will be the hangman's holiday—just so," nodded the reckless Mark, once more the fearless sport whom men had dubbed High-water Mark, from those very qualities which lifted him far above the common herd.

"Will you come down to sober business, or must I let my men tie and flog that insolent spirit out of your carcass?" harshly demanded Lucifer, plainly admitting his defeat in this battle of tongues.

"You haven't an army half strong enough to do that!" sternly retorted Mark, his blue eyes gleaming, his strong hands closing ready for use in case such an order should be given. "Enough

to butcher, I grant you, but not to bind or to flog me."

"Shall I put it to the test?"

"Not if you hope to learn aught from my lips. In any case I give no pledge that you'll come out any the wiser, but—business goes if you so elect. What do you want to learn from me?"

"Business it shall be," retorted Lucifer, seemingly in no immediate haste to answer that pointed question. "And, as all business men should, we'll begin at the beginning."

"Lead off, and I'll follow suit or trump, as your first card seems to warrant."

"You're no fool, Bywater. And, being a wise man, after your fashion, you've doubtless guessed that it was through no idle freak or silly fancy I pinched you this evening."

"Thanks for the compliment," bowed Mark, a peculiar smile lighting up his handsome face. "I'll return it when you've given evidence of good sense. Until then—I'm all ears open!"

Lucifer forced a laugh at that cut, but if he felt anger at such plain terms, he held it in subjection for the moment.

"Be sure I haven't taken so much trouble just for sport. I've had spies on your track for months past. If necessary, I could prove this, by describing your life, your actions, your secret thoughts, even!"

"Then you really have some claim to your fire-and-brimstone title, after all!" laughed the sport, half-sneeringly. "Of course you wouldn't stoop so low as to lie about it. Lucifer fell, but not so low down as all that comes to."

The outlaw made no attempt to check that speech, standing with arms folded over his broad chest, forbidding in his sable disguise.

"You are playing with edged tools, Mark Bywater; look out that you don't cut your own throat instead of merely your fingers. But, as I set out to say: I halted that stage expressly for the purpose of capturing and bringing you to this lonely spot."

"What a pity you didn't send me warning! I'd have met you so much more warmly—ay!" with a sudden touch of venom in his tones; "so hotly that you'd be far on your road to Tophet in search of shade and coolness!"

Lucifer laughed in brief triumph, for he felt that his having for even an instant thrown this cool hand off his balance was well worth expending a breath upon.

"Did I sting you, poor fellow? Well," with abrupt gravity, as he resumed: "I'm satisfied if you are, and business goes on once more."

"Of course I had an object in taking all this trouble, to say nothing of the expense I've been at. And that object—is to join you in the holy bonds of matrimony with a charming lady!"

"So you hinted before," curtly.

"This is more than a hint: it's law and gospel. Before the sun rises in the morning, you'll be a Benedict or a corpse!"

"Show me the lady, and I'll make my election at once."

"What matter? Say yes or no, in a breath!"

"No, thank you! First, the one you call a lady may be so old and ugly and vile that even a grave would smell far sweeter. Then—she may be the spawn of the devil or—your daughter, or even your light-o'-love!"

With a savage outburst, Prince Lucifer struck those sneering lips—to be caught by those muscular arms, whirled up and back over Mark's shoulder, striking on the rocks, to fall over the edge of the cliff!

CHAPTER IX.

AN AGE OF AGONY.

An instant after the self-styled King of the Mountains sprung erect to hurl that ragged missile into the covert where his enemies were crouching, the dark edge of a cloud crept over the face of the full moon, casting all below into comparative darkness.

"Ha! ha! ha!" rang out that maniacal laughter as the weird man leaped and danced back and forth along the ledge of rock, his crazed brain hugely delighted by that horrible evidence of anguish. "Hearken to the wail! Listen to the chorus! Music sweeter far than any song of love or—Screech and howl and gnash your tusks, imps of Tophet!" his voice swelling and seeming to fill the whole region as he snatched up other fragments of rock and sent them whistling through the gloom.

All this Una Freestone saw and heard, like one in a hideous nightmare, but, as that terrible creature fairly brushed her cowering person while groping for fresh missiles in the dark, she gave a low, choking cry of utter fright, then sprung away through the night!

It was a blind, unreasoning flight. She knew not whither her uncertain steps were taking her. She only knew that it meant death or madness to remain longer in the clutches of that terrible being.

Stumbling, staggering, and at times falling over the unseen obstacles in her course, the poor girl pressed blindly on, fearing, now, to think of rest or hiding.

The cloud passed from over the face of the moon, and by the clear light Una was enabled to make better and easier progress, though the

way was terribly rough and difficult for her tender feet.

In her sore affright, it seemed almost as if she was making no progress at all—as if that mass of rugged rocks kept maliciously revolving just as fast as she herself advanced, keeping her limited to the same spot, and that within easy clutch of the madman.

Still she struggled on, until her bodily powers failed her; then she crept under a friendly boulder, cowering there in a shivering heap, and fearfully listening for the token of dread pursuit.

How much distance she had covered, how long that flight had lasted, Una had no means of knowing. Her brain had been whirling dizzily ever since those bony hands first closed upon her. Her nerves also had failed her, though her reasoning powers began to come back to her now, in her dawning hopes of escape.

What did it all mean? Why was she so persecuted? Could it be—

"The curse—the curse of blood upon the golden phantom!" Una moaned, hardly conscious what words passed her lips.

She lay shivering, feeling almost as though the coming of death would be a welcome relief, until, with a sharp catching of her breath she lifted her head, gazing wildly backward along the way she had come.

Again that sound! Was it a cry to her? Was it the horrible laugh of that skin-clad monster as he came bounding along over those rocks to reclaim his captive?

That dread thought was quite sufficient to send her on in blind flight once more, giving thought only to escape from that hideous being.

Almost at the start the poor child tripped and fell, sorely bruising herself against a rough rock, but, quick as thought, she was up and away once more, for, louder, clearer, nearer sounded that wild cry from her line of flight.

In her distracted ears it sounded like the King of the Mountains bidding her pause for his coming, but that fancy only lent fresh wings to her flying feet, renewed strength to her already overtired muscles.

With remarkable speed the frightened girl maintained her flight, crossing ground which, in saner mood, she would have found impassable even with the broad day to light the easiest way for her feet.

On, until her limbs failed her once more.

She crawled into a dark crevice between two rough masses of rock, pressing into the space until she could retreat no further. Then, hiding her face in her shivering hands, she waited—listening!—listening!

Time and again she fancied she could detect that wild cry of angry command. Time and again she shivered as her overwrought nerves painted that skin-clad figure stealing maliciously upon her covert.

But, little by little, as her breath returned, and her brain grew steadier, she learned to distinguish the real from the unreal. She grew rational enough to try and recall her memories of that distant camp, and decide its probable direction from her present place of hiding.

Where was Luther Merrydew? Why had he not come to her rescue? If he loved her as he protested—

"Not even death could hold him back, if he knew I was in peril!"

Only mentally uttered, yet Una hid her hot face as though she had proclaimed the truth to all the world; but it was not the darkly-handsome face of Luther Merrydew that rose like a vision before her eyes in those moments, to fade even more swiftly than it had grown, for from somewhere high at hand there came—Was it a human call?

Breathlessly Una listened, trying to retreat still further into that narrow crack in the rocks, feeling that she would surely die if that wild man were to show his shaggy face at the entrance.

Silence—all still as death, until—

"Una! Una! Una!"

Faint and far away the sounds, yet surely—or was it her turning brain that changed inarticulate sounds into her own name? Who could be out there in the wilderness, calling upon her name? Not—Had she told her name to that skin-garbed monster?

With curious persistence she was trying to decide that point, when a fragment of rock rattled down from the top of her refuge, falling with a little clatter almost at her feet. And, looking up, she gave a stifled cry of fright as she caught sight of a—Was it a human head and face outlined against the stars?

It surely must be, and yet she was given such a brief space in which to inspect that object: barely long enough to make out its general shape, to note those fiercely-glowing eyes—eyes that seemed backed by living fire!

Then the vision vanished, and she heard a scrambling leap or a swift slide down the side of the rock.

"Una! Una! Una!"

This time there could be no mistake. It was a human voice, clearly enunciating her name, and much nearer her refuge than before.

Yet the poor child made no response; she

dared not; for, directly in front of her refuge, dimly outlined by the stars and moonlight, there crouched a terrible form, the owner of those flaming eyes!

Brighter even than when they first met hers, yet less terrible now that she recognized them as belonging to a wild beast instead of the wilder human from whom she had escaped so recently. Its huge head—Was it too large for that narrow crevice?

"Una! Una! Una!"

An answer was given, but not by the maiden called upon. The wild beast swiftly shifted its position, lifting its cat-like head and uttering a plaintive cry—so like the agonized wail of a frightened child that Una gasped with mingled wonder and horror.

"Una! thank Heaven! I'm coming!" cried that voice, nearer, clearer, recognizable now as that of Luther Merrydew.

And, as the mountain lion repeated its deceptive wail, the half-crazed girl tried to shriek out a warning, even pressing forward until she could gaze about her from the crevice, to see Luther Merrydew rushing toward the spot—to see that huge cat crouching for its death-leap—to hear a fierce yell, a hoarse cry, as man and beast came together in a death-grapple!

CHAPTER X.

THROUGH THE SHADES OF NIGHT.

UNA had had barely time to see this, to catch the bright glimmer of bared steel as it flashed between man and beast, then a cloud swept again over the face of the full moon, blotting out all further vision for the time being.

It seemed to her overwrought nerves that it was sweeping her only near friend from the face of the earth; a piteous shriek parted her lips as her limbs failed her once again, and she sunk down in a shivering heap at the mouth of the crevice, burying her face in her hands to still further blot out that dread vision.

"Una! courage!" came a panting yet confident voice from out the gloom, rising clear above the scattering of loose stones and maddened snarls. "I'm coming to—Down ye go, cat o' the devil!"

A fierce, spitting wail, ending in a stifled snarl, then the moonlight came back again, just in time to show Una the man rising to his feet, the mountain-cat lying in the throes of death before him.

"Una, my precious!" panted the victor, turning toward her, though his eyes as yet failed to distinguish her figure as it crouched in the shadows cast by those twin boulders. "Una, where are you?"

"Luther—my friend!"

She staggered to her feet, stretching out her arms, forgetting what had that evening come to pass, in her great joy at recognizing a friend and a defender against that terrible man-monster.

With a cry, Luther Merrydew leaped forward and clasped her to his breast, covering her pale face with kisses, but only to hear a faint moan part her blanched lips, and then to find the poor child a limp and nerveless weight on his arms.

Young Merrydew proved himself a wise as well as ardent lover, for, lowering the maiden to the ground, he hurriedly drew a wicker-covered flask of liquor from an inner pocket, and unscrewing the top he gently forced a few drops between her lips.

The effect was almost magical, as it usually is when tested on those wholly unused to the poison, and with a spasmodic catching of her breath, Una strove to arise, shrinking from that supporting arm.

A black frown shot across that dark face, but Luther smothered the curse that sought utterance. Though his hot blood was hard to keep under control, he was wise enough to make the attempt.

"That frightful—"

"Lies yonder, with cloven heart, Miss Una," interposed the man, nodding toward the muscular body of the mountain lion. "Twas an ugly rascal so far as looks go, but, if I hadn't come up in time to rob it of the tender morsel it had cornered, the cur would have shown its tail rather than its teeth. Romance is well enough, but, fact is better; and that calls the mountain lion a thorough coward when met by a man."

"I thought—I feared you were being killed!"

"Far from it," with a light laugh. "I did catch a few scratches, but I'll have to look twice before finding them in the morning. I wouldn't have got even so much, only for that cloud. But, I'm thinking more of you, dear friend; you are safe! That wild rascal did you no real injury?"

"No—only to frighten me awfully!" with a renewed shiver as the King of the Mountain was recalled. "He may come up—"

"I'm not so sure of that. Though the darkness stood his friend. I hardly think all my bullets went astray. At any rate, I winged each one with a prayer that it might cut home!"

"Then—that horrible scream?"

"Came from the lips of our cook, Telescope Charley. The rock struck him—not to hurt seriously. The fellow was worse scared, you understand, so never worry over him."

A cool observer would have seen that Luther was lying, but Una, with a faint sigh of relief, arose to her feet.

"We can go—you know the way back to camp?" she asked.

"I can find it, beyond a doubt, but—are you strong enough to make the trip?" with an anxious scrutiny before which her dark eyes lowered their lids. "Would it not be better to rest here, until day dawns? I can start a fire, and—"

"No, no, I must not—I must hasten back to my guardian," hurriedly interposed the maiden.

Luther bit his lip sharply as he read her meaning aright.

"Your will is my law, Miss Una, though I still think it would be wiser were you to rest here until you have in part recovered from all you've been called upon to endure. But, since you so desire, I'll help you back to father without further delay."

"You are very kind, Mr. Merrydew," Una said, her eyes briefly lifting to his handsome face. "I'm very grateful—you have twice saved my life, and—"

"Without cost to me!" interposed the man. "I could almost wish I had suffered—but let that pass. You must take my arm, Miss Una."

After all, he lost nothing by this self-subjection. Una would have been less than feminine had not her heart softened just a little toward the man who had not stopped to count the cost before risking his life in order to preserve hers.

With Una leaning on his arm, for now that the first excitement began to subside, she found her bodily powers had been sadly overtaxed, Luther Merrydew left the spot where he had conquered the mountain lion, quietly talking of the past adventure.

He told how he had recovered from that terrible fall given him by the madman, in time to follow and overtake Pritty Poll and Telescope Charley on the trail of the abductor.

He felt Una tremble anew as he mentioned that strange being, but believed he was acting all for the best, and persisted with his recital. The sooner she knew everything connected with that ugly happening, the lighter would be her mind.

He told how they kept the trail until the barren waste was gained, where human steps could leave no trace.

"But the hand of Providence kept us from going widely astray," he added, his tones reverential as befitting his words. "And when we first discovered the madman, we were almost near enough to bring him down by a shot."

"You shiver, little lady, but why should you? What is he but a wild beast? And when I saw him lift you in his arms—when I faintly caught his harsh notes as he talked to or questioned you—only the dread of hitting you as well held back my bullet!"

He told how they crept around to a better position, but how, just as they gained it, the mountain monster suspected or sighted them.

"The rock brushed my cheek, to strike down the cook. The cloud shut out all light, but I rushed forward, shooting the instant the cloud passed and I could do so without harming you, Una. The fellow fled, but you were gone! He did not take you—I could see that much. Then—Well, I reckon I was a bit mad myself, for a time."

"It is past—do not recall it further!" faintly murmured Una, yet after a feminine fashion clinging to it herself. "Then it was you I heard calling all the time? I feared it was—I was mistaken."

"And so was I," with a soft laugh at the coincidence. "For up to that last wild screech, I really took the notes of the panther for your dear voice—think of it!"

"Don't—I'd rather try to forget it all!" with another shiver and a trifle closer clinging to his strong arm. "If I could only close my eyes for a minute and open them to find myself back in the dear old home, I'd give—I'd give ten years of my life!"

"In the morning you'll look at it differently, Una," cheerily. "By the warm light of the sun things will take on a vastly different color from what they seem to wear now. Why—just think what marvels you will have to treat your lady friends to when the treasure is found."

"Twill never be found—by or through me!" with sudden energy in voice and manner that seemed to startle her companion. "I'll abandon the wild chase—I'll never take another step in that direction, let the temptation come never so powerfully!"

"Una! are you mad?"

"I believe I have been mad. Surely I was not wholly sane when I left my friends, my home, all that ought to be near and dear to a girl like myself, to come into this horrible wilderness—after what?"

"After a fortune which ought to have come into your possession long years ago."

"Chasing a Phantom Inheritance—seeking for something which may never have existed save in the unsettled imagination of a trial-crazed man!"

"You forgot the cryptogram, Una."

"If I only could forget it—forget all and

everything connected with this hateful legacy—that mockery of a will!"

"A will which, if true, leaves you one-half of an enormous fortune, remember, little lady," persisted Merrydew, to whom the bare idea of abandoning their curious quest seemed very distasteful.

"If true—you say well, Luther Merrydew! Is there aught of truth in that will, that letter, that cryptogram? I do not believe it! I felt it back yonder. For the first time I realized my worse than folly in yielding to the persuasions and arguments of your father. And, so realizing, I made a vow: will you help me to carry it out, dear friend?"

"What is it, Una?" asked Merrydew.

"To turn my back forever on this Phantom! To start with the first dawn for my old home! Say that you will uphold me in this vow, even against your father, if he tries to check me."

There was a brief pause; then Luther said, earnestly:

"I promise, Una. Your will is law and Gospel to me. Father will be half-crazed at turning back now, just when success seems assured, but I'd do far more than facing his anger—for your sweet sake, Una!"

Una shrank back with a stifled cry, but it was not wholly at his loverly notes, for, pointing ahead, she gasped:

"Look! what is that?"

CHAPTER XI.

A COOL HEAD AND STEADY HAND.

MAKING one revolution as he was cast over the athletic sport's shoulder, Prince Lucifer struck in a heap close to the outer edge of the ledge, hanging thus for a single second—barely long enough for all who witnessed that marvelous exhibition of skill and muscle to realize what surely must follow. Then, with an inarticulate cry, the masked outlaw pitched over the brink, vanishing from view of his band, each member of which seemed fairly petrified with horror.

Only for a single breath; only long enough for Mark Bywater to turn and realize what he had wrought; not long enough for the reckless sport to make even an effort to escape by a bold dash.

"Kill him! Tear him to pieces! Avenge the boss!"

From a dozen throats came savage curses and yells and threats of this nature, and from either side the armed ruffians closed in on the brave man who had so swiftly overcome their leader.

Every hand clutched a weapon, and it was only the instinctive fear of injuring friends that kept them from at once opening fire on the man who faced them so undauntedly.

With a single backward spring that carried him close to the line of shrubbery at the base of the precipice, High-water Mark "put up his hands," ready to fight for his life to the bitter end, though he had no idea that the Imps of Prince Lucifer would permit him to land even a first blow.

"Swing out further, so we can riddle him!" viciously cried one of the outlaws, pointing his meaning by his own movements.

The hint was promptly followed, and though a bolder, braver man never drew the breath of life, High-water Mark half-closed his eyes and held his breath, waiting for the death that seemed inevitable.

The outlaws swung outward, lined along the encampment, and by that maneuver they might use their pistols at will, without killing friends instead of foeman. But before one of the lifting weapons could spit out its vicious contents, a lithe figure sprung from the bushes close beside Bywater, pausing between him and the enemy, crying out in sharp, metallic accents:

"Hold hard, ye Imps! I'll unroof the first among ye to pull trigger! Hold hard—and fall back!"

Instinctively Mark Bywater took in that unexpected vision at a single glance, seeing a slender, lithe form, clad in garments of some dark hue, with a cowl-like mask over head and face, similar to those worn by the Imps of Prince Lucifer.

Each gloved hand clasped a revolver, the muzzles of which, by a waving motion, seemed to cover each and every member of that vengeful gang.

That was all that High-water Mark paused to see; then he leaped forward and with deft, certain grip twisted a pistol from the hand of his champion, the same movement swinging the cowled figure aside and behind him.

"At your service, gentlemen!" he cried, his bold, handsome face all aglow in the firelight, his big blue eyes filled with the light of battle. "Pitch the note, and I'll join in, even if I can't play leader!"

"Hold! remember his worth to us all!" sharply cried the being who had come to his rescue at the critical moment.

"He done butchered the boss!"

"Kicked him plum' over the jump, so he did!"

"We done boun' in oath fer to shet his clam, so—"

That rattling fire of harsh and sullen comments was cut short by a hoarse, strained cry

coming from the gloom beyond the edge of the narrow shelf, and with gasping ejaculations the armed ruffians wheeled in their tracks, some leaning forward, others shrinking back as though expecting some hideous vision to soar up out of the depths.

"You devils! help me up! A rope—get a Haste!"

With a sharp cry Mark's unexpected champion leaped to the brink and knelt there, leaning perilously far over the edge, but before those hidden lips could shape a word, the voice of Prince Lucifer came once more from out the darkness, saying:

"I'm all right. Guard Bywater. Bring a rope and— This cursed bush is cracking!"

All this passed with the rapidity of thought, and the perfect discipline under which Prince Lucifer held his Imps, was exemplified by the manner in which his words were followed out.

Mark Bywater, thinking escape possible during that confusion, was already moving in the direction of the trail by which he alone knew how to leave the shelf, but now near a dozen armed men sprung to cut off his flight.

The odds were too heavy, even for a man with his cool head and steady hand. Even if they did not slay him outright, they would bear him down by pure weight of numbers, even though he might slay some of them first.

If not killed, he would lose his newly-won weapon, and so long as he retained that, he could in part at least dictate his own terms.

Reasoning thus, he drew back until the bushes brushed his back, revolver lifted as he coolly cried out:

"Keep your distance, gentlemen, or the price of deep mourning will take an upward boom. It makes me tired to be crowded!"

"Leave him to the Prince!" sharply cried the slender figure in which High-water Mark was beginning to take a peculiar interest. "Get a rope, or—

"Lively, ye Imps!" harshly roared Prince Lucifer from out the darkness below. "Are you stopping to elect my successor? Wait until I'm dead, or ye'll sup sorrow with a— Lively, curse ye one and all!"

"Courage!" cried the mask, catching up a blazing brand from the nearest fire and holding it over the brink, revealing the outlaw chief desperately clinging to a mass of broken, vine-clad bushes a score feet below, in which he had caught while shooting downward after that unexpected toss and tumble. "Only a moment longer!"

A lasso was brought and the noose deftly lowered until it slipped over the head and one shoulder of the imperiled outlaw. Then, suspending his weight by a single hand, Lucifer secured a firm grip on the rope with his freed hand. After that the result was sure, and a dozen strong arms quickly drew him back to the solid rock ledge.

Not a word of thanks or of thanksgiving did the rescued chief utter, and his only thought seemed to be of his captive. He gave a vicious snarl and leaped forward as he saw Mark, but recoiled as the cool sport covered him with a grim muzzle.

"Don't burn your fingers, old fellow!"

"Where did you—who gave him that gun?" hoarsely cried the chief.

And again High-water Mark was the first to speak:

"Simply borrowed it, your Dishonor, for the occasion. Shall I fire a salute as a token of my delight at your speedy resurrection?"

"If there's a traitor among ye all, I'll—"

"Keep your linen on, Captain Cut-throat, or shed it at my feet. I didn't ask permission to inspect the tool more closely. I can't say if it's worth half the rumpus you're inclined to kick up about it, but if you insist—turn your head a bit to the left, and I'll see how true she carries! That eye-hole of yours—"

"He snatched it out of my hand, chief," hastily interposed the one mainly in fault, but boldly facing the enraged outlaw. "The Imps were menacing his life, on your account, when I chipped in to save him."

"For all of which I'll express my gratitude when I've more elbow-room, gentle sir," blandly nodded the cool sport, still keeping Prince Lucifer covered by his confiscated weapon. "Meantime—shall we try if this gun be as good as it is pretty, old fellow?"

There was no immediate response to that bland query. Prince Lucifer glanced swiftly around, as though to make sure that all avenues of escape were closed against his once helpless captive.

His nerve had plainly received a severe shock by that nearly fatal fall, and his rescue from what had seemed certain annihilation was far too recent for him to have fully rallied. This was proven by his present indecision: his wits seemed befogged, and incapable of working with their wonted quickness.

"What do you mean to do, fool?" he growled, not flinching from that menacing muzzle, yet showing no inclination to advance in its teeth.

"To hold my end level while these shells last," was the prompt response, uttered in a matter-of-fact tone which was far more convincing than the loudest blustering. "When they give

out—well, I'll have six broad marks to my credit, anyway!"

Prince Lucifer forced a harsh laugh, flinging out a hand that called attention to his Imps, ranged around, each hand holding knife or pistol, each ruffian plainly waiting for the words which would hurl them at the throat of the man at bay.

"As complete a collection of knaves as 'twas ever my ill-fortune to run up against on a dark night," lightly nodded High-water Mark.

"Drop that gun!" fiercely cried Prince Lucifer, evidently tired of parleying. "Drop it and yield, or I'll cause my men to fill you so full of holes you'd sell for a riddle at first sight!"

CHAPTER XII.

BOW THE DEADLOCK WAS BROKEN.

It was the tone and manner of one who knew he could easily make every threat good, and High-water Mark was cool enough to realize as much. But he knew, too, that his only chance lay in keeping up that bold front as long as possible.

He knew that escape was impossible, without the safeguard which Prince Lucifer alone could give him; and he was far too cool-headed to anticipate any such concession, after all that had happened.

He felt that death or captivity was inevitable, and he was not yet sure which horn of the dilemma he would prefer.

"Have you made and signed your last will and testament, dear fellow?" he blandly asked, a cold, strange smile lighting up his recklessly handsome face.

"Will you drop that gun?"

"After I've dropped you—with five others as make-weight."

"One word from my lips—"

"Will add another orifice to that hidden mug of yours, before said word grows cold on your lips."

Beyond a doubt the sport at bay meant all he threatened, and for a brief space Prince Lucifer moved uneasily, glancing quickly to either hand like one seeking some method of breaking that curious deadlock.

"If you have any choice of companions, pick 'em out, Captain Cut-throat," smoothly added High-water Mark, outwardly the coolest, most unconcerned of all the party. "I'm the most obliging critter you ever picked up for a prize and dropped for a tarantula. Just as soon check one as another for a trip across the last divide!"

Some of those cowled figures visibly shrunk back, seemingly in fear lest their chief order them to close in on that cool hand, and as he noted this, Mark laughed mockingly.

"Losing their appetite mighty fast, old fellow! Reckon you'll have to bell the cat your own precious self!"

"I'll do it, too!" sharply cried Prince Lucifer, flinging out his hands so that all could see they held no weapons, then steadily stepping toward the sport at bay as he added: "Give me that gun, I say!"

It was another exhibition of nerve, and even High-water Mark felt a passing glow of admiration for the ruffian on that account, though this by no means changed his resolve to make the most of his present advantage.

"Hay-foot—straw-foot—halt!" the last word ringing out with such deadly emphasis that Prince Lucifer involuntarily obeyed.

But the chief adroitly covered that momentary weakness by sternly pronouncing:

"Don't be a bigger fool than nature intended, Mark Bywater! Burn a single grain of powder, and you'll die a thousand deaths rolled up in one!"

Without reply, without the slightest preliminary motion by which his desperate resolve could be anticipated or guarded against, High-water Mark leaped forward, flinging his left arm about Prince Lucifer, viciously bending him back across his leg, clapping the muzzle of his revolver against that sable cowl as he thus dined:

"Hold hard, all! The first move seals your chief's death!"

Strong, muscular man though he was, Prince Lucifer felt himself but little better than an infant in that desperate grip, taken by surprise as he had been. And while held in that cramped position, he could make little or no effort to break away from that tenacious grip.

The Imps swayed, with hoarse oaths and cries of surprised dismay at this wholly unexpected move, but that stern warning came before even the quickest among them all could bring pistol to bear.

A startled cry came from the one who had come to Mark's rescue a brief while before, and he started forward with the husky words:

"Don't—Spare him, I implore you!"

"His life lies in your hands," came the quick response, as High-water Mark deftly altered his position and shifted his grip; this time with muscular fingers gripping the neck of Prince Lucifer, his left arm rigidly extended, using the cowled captive as a sort of advanced breast-work. "Clear the way, gentlemen! Hands up and empty! Drop your tools and give free pass-

age, unless you're tired of serving your present chief!"

"Don't— Kill him first!" gasped Prince Lucifer, hoarsely, making a desperate attempt to jerk away from that merciless grip; only to feel those steel-like fingers sink deeper into the swelling flesh of his throat.

"Second, maybe, never first," grimly laughed the cool sport, pistol coming in sharp contact with that unruly head.

Prince Lucifer, failing to break that grip, knowing that his own doom was surely sealed even should his men take him at his fierce word and shoot down the young man, promptly changed front, managing to utter in audible tones:

"A truce, Imps! Pen him in, but don't shoot until I say so!"

Again the one who had posed as a defender interposed with:

"Spare him, sir, and your own life is safe!"

"No doubt you mean it, but— Will you countersign the treaty, Prince Lucifer?"

"You can't escape. My Imps will riddle you at my slightest signal. You can kill me, but do you weigh your life against mine?" calmly uttered the outlaw chief, making no further attempt to break away.

"It is giving away tremendous odds, isn't it?" lightly laughed Bywater, but with all his seeming carelessness, never more wholly on his guard than at that juncture. "I'm a true disciple of the gentle G. W. I can't tell a lie, though I've often tried. So—hardly that low, Captain Cutthroat?"

"Then be wise, in time. Give up your pistol. Surrender, and I pass my sacred word of honor—"

"Oh, captain!" ejaculated Mark, in tones of horror.

It was a bitter pill, but Prince Lucifer swallowed it without a visible grimace.

"On my word as a cut-throat, then, if you like that better."

"It has a more reasonable twang about it, at any rate. But you were about to promise—what?"

"Give up your gun, and I'll spare your life. I'll blot out all that has passed, and we'll make a fresh beginning. Refuse, and though you may kill me first, my Imps shall toast you over a slow fire!"

"Is that so?" in mock surprise. "Well, wait a bit before you take the drop, captain."

"Then you agree?" eagerly panted the chieftain.

"I didn't say so. Still, I'm open to conviction if— Just button up while I weigh the matter in my mind, will you, captain?"

An inarticulate growl came from those cowled lips, and a momentary quiver shot through the muscular neck which Mark Bywater was still gripping, though with slackened fingers.

"Of course, captain, if you'd rather kick over the traces than take time for composing your final prayers, don't stop on my account. I'm a sort of cosmopolitan. I can fit myself into almost any shaped hole. I can dance or fiddle, just as the occasion requires. And though I'm not over-proud— What is it, gentle knave?"

"Take what time you must have, but cut it as short as possible," sullenly growled Prince Lucifer.

"I generally jog along at my own gait, but thanks, all the same."

Though outwardly so cool, so reckless, Mark Bywater was never more earnest in all his life than he was just then.

His former suspicions, faint and indistinct when the one who called himself by that Satanic title exposed his first card, were rapidly taking shape, needing but little more to become convictions.

Unless these ruffians were hoping for a far greater and richer stake than any ordinary road-agents could hope to squeeze out of a roving sport, such a villain as Prince Lucifer would never have dallied so long when met with such flat defiance.

"It's that confounded Golden Phantom again!" flashed through his busy brain, bringing a sudden frown to his shapely brows.

If right in this suspicion, he felt reasonably sure that his life itself would be held sacred by Prince Lucifer until the whole secret had been wrested from his lips; only when that treasure was fairly within his grasp, would this arch-rascal indulge his personal thirst for revenge on the one who had so humiliated him before his evil gang.

Then, too, he could see no possible avenue of escape, so long as the outlaw chief maintained his present sullen resolve to die himself before giving his recent captive perfect liberty.

The Imps, armed, silent, watchful, barred the way to the trail by which alone he could leave that shelf in safety. Even with a revolver held to the temple of Prince Lucifer, he could hardly hope to force a harmless passage through their ranks.

"Shall I order out a couch for your greater ease?" viciously snarled the uncomfortable chief. "Shall I order breakfast prepared? Don't hurry—there's an eternity before us!"

"Growing restless, eh?" softly laughed High-water Mark. "Well, I'm not wondering at it

so awfully much. It must remind you of the inevitable end: scaffold, black cap, drop, sheriff, etc."

"It reminds me that death still hovers over your cursed head!" growled Prince Lucifer, stung to the quick by that unshaken calm. "In one word—shall I bid my fellows open the ball?"

"Are you so mighty anxious to know how it feels to have your roof lifted, captain? Slow and easy gets there with both feet, remember. And— I say, Miss—Mister Mask?" with a nod toward that lithe figure, smiling grimly as he noticed that quick, involuntary start at his intentional slip. "Beg pardon, but your figure reminds me so strongly of a certain very dear lady acquaintance of mine that—"

"Have you decided to save your life—and his?" curtly interposed the being thus addressed, pointing the words by a gesture.

"On conditions, yes," nodded the cool sport.

"Name them!" flashed Prince Lucifer, only to have those fingers close swiftly, warningly about his neck once more.

"Button up, captain! I'm talking to your better—is it 'half,' or am I 'way off in my guess at the relationship?"

"He's my father—I'm his son," hastily cried the mask.

Mark smiled afresh as his keen eyes ran over that shapely figure, each curve of which seemed to contradict that claimed sex; but just then he did not care to broach a fresh point of dispute, and calmly made answer:

"Son goes, though I could wish you a better man for a parent. But that don't count, just now. If you're willing to admit the relationship, I'm not going to question your lack of taste."

"Curse you! come to the point!" growled Prince Lucifer, each moment of that humiliating captivity seeming an age of shame to his inflamed brain.

"I already have the solemn pledge of your father, young man," as coolly resumed the sport, paying no attention to the growler. "I'm not over-proud, but I would hate to play the part of deputy hangman. I'd feel still meaner to swap life for life with this—your father."

"Set him free. Yield up the revolver you stole from a hand that was lifted in defense of your own life. Do this, and your life shall be spared to you," hurriedly spoke the youth, stretching out a hand as though to catch the weapon in dispute.

"You pledge me your word of honor to that effect?"

"I do! I swear it by my dear mother's grave!"

High-water Mark instantly released his captive and placed the pistol in that gloved hand, drawing back with folded arms.

Prince Lucifer sprung away from him, forcing the youth back as he called out a title which brought a burly ruffian to the front.

"On deck, boss! What's wanting o' Bruiser?"

"Read him a lesson! He's too fresh— Put him in pickle!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A GLIMPSE OF THE CLOVEN HOOF.

UNA FREESTONE clung closely to the arm of her escort, pointing with unsteady hand through the night.

Ahead of them showed a dim, uncertain light, faintly reflected from foliage, rendering all else about still darker by contrast.

For a single breath Luther Merrydew stared ahead, hand on pistol, but then, as he recognized the cause of his companion's affright, a low, reassuring laugh parted his lips.

"Surely you're not frightened at that welcome beacon, Una? Poor dad will hardly feel flattered to think that his labors meet with such a poor reward, and—"

An ugly sound—between a yell and a curse—broke upon their hearing, cutting Luther short and causing Una fresh fear as she dropped his arm and turned to flee.

"That monster! I'd rather die than—"

With a swift bound Merrydew regained her side, clasping her in his strong arms, one hand ready to close over her lips to stifle any scream of fright or anger which might attempt to pass them.

"Una—darling!" he muttered, half angrily. "There's nothing to dread. That glow comes from the fire at our camp—the same fire that was burning when that monster carried you away."

"But you never said— I thought it was still a long way off!"

"Because, like an idiot, I wanted to give you a glad surprise."

Una ceased to struggle, though her form was still all atremble, and realizing how sorely her nerves had been shaken, Luther Merrydew thought it wisest to still humor her fears.

"I'm sure all's well ahead," he said, in guarded tones, as he passed a supporting arm about her waist and caused her to face the dim reflection which had so alarmed her. "I know that a single shout would bring father running to meet and greet you, half crazed with pure joy."

"But—that awful scream?"

"From the cook, no doubt," the gloom hiding the ugly frown which came into his face as he slowly moved forward with his even yet reluctant companion. "He may have been hurt worse than I thought. Pritty Poll may be looking after his injuries. It can't be anything else."

Still, his caution increased rather than lessened as they drew nearer the point from whence that light sprung, and he came to a full pause the instant a fairly unobstructed view of the camp-ground might be attained.

The fire was blazing brightly, but recently replenished. Andrew Merrydew was crouching beyond it, his fat face paler than ordinary, his looks and actions those of a half-distracted man.

Midway between the old lawyer and the white tent, Telescope Charley was lying on the ground, one bony fist savagely menacing Pritty Poll, over whose ugly visage there spread a grin in which malice, mock pity and coarse humor curiously blended.

"It's turrible, pard—jest turrible 'thout eend," he was saying when the wayfarers first caught sight of the little tableau. "But kickin' don't count—an' you ith only one hoof left fer to do the job with. I never see a cleaner smash-to-flinders, an—"

"I'll see you hung fu'st, durn ye!" howled the crippled man, half-rising on one arm as he menaced the grinning ruffian with the other.

"It'd make the rope fit heap sight snugger—seein' you thar, pard, hoppin' on one trotter, hel't up by a crutch—deed it jest would, now! But—if you don't let me whack that lump o' sp'iled meat an' bone an' sinner off, pard, you'll never w'ar out even a fu'st leg o' wood! Lis'en!" with exaggerated interest as he bent his head and held up a warning finger. "Ain't that a car'on-fly buzzin'? Look out, pard! ef he lights onto that leg, it's good-by, John!"

With a frantic curse and howl of rage combined, the tortured man flashed forth a knife, but before he could hurl it at the malicious ruffian, Luther Merrydew cried out sternly:

"Hold! you snarling curs! Cover your teeth, or answer to me!"

He sprung into the opening, his hand uplifted in an imperious gesture, before which Pritty Poll shrank, shame-faced, and Telescope Charley quickly hid his glittering weapon.

"My boy!" cried Andrew Merrydew, springing to his feet and stumbling forward in his eagerness. "You haven't— Where is she?"

"Safe and sound, thank Heaven!" laughed Luther, turning back to where he had temporarily abandoned his fair charge.

But Una, glad indeed to be once more with her guardian, sprung forward unaided, to be clasped in those fat arms, to be pressed to that fat bosom, to have those fat lips sputter an incoherent greeting over her shoulder as her fair face drooped.

"Glory to Moses! Glory to—to everybody and their relations! You're safe, and all the rest may go hang! My gallant lad—my noble son—I knew he'd rescue you even if it killed him a thousand times over and over and—"

"Stop and catch breath, governor," interposed Luther, laughing in tones, but giving the half-frantic lawyer a glance that seemed fiery enough to scorch where it fell. "And poor Una needs rest, far more than she does your hugs, springing from pure affection though they do."

"I am—I do feel very weary," the maiden said, lifting her head and forcing a wan smile through her tears. "If I might—in the morning I'll be better able to talk."

The elder Merrydew seemed incapable of taking a hint gracefully, just then, and Luther loosened his embrace with a vigor that caused the lawyer to give vent to a muffled howl of pain as his dutiful son led Una across to the white tent, bending over her trembling hand with silent devotion before letting the flap fall to shut out her form.

Turning away, the young man paused briefly beside the injured cook, whose right knee had been fearfully shattered by the fragment of rock hurled into the bushes by the King of the Mountains.

Telescope Charley, broken by his intense sufferings, began charging Pritty Poll with a malicious desire to add still further to his agony, and that fiery-crested worthy as volubly explained his part by showing how surely the shattered member must come off in order to preserve the life of its owner.

"Settle it between you," impatiently frowned Luther Merrydew. "Of course I'll do what I can, but you mustn't look to me for a decision. Make up your mind, Charley, and then call me over."

He turned away, unheeding the faint call which the crippled man sent after him, and with a hand on the arm of the old lawyer, Luther drew apart from both the fire and the tent, where their conversation might be secure from other ears.

"A nasty bit of business!" he frowned, as they stood face to face once more. "What do you think of it, old fellow?"

"Think?" echoed Andrew Merrydew, rubbing his fat hands in nervous delight. "I'm so full

The sentence was never completed, for with a quick, rasping breath Andrew Merrydew caught up the parchment and thrust it into his bosom, his other hand tremblingly pointing to several dark, rough-clad shapes which just then sprung into the little glade.

One of them sprung to the front of the tent in which Una Freestone was resting, crying out in coarse tones as he caught at and tore open the sealing flap:

"Take keer o' the buzzards, lads! This dainty dove belongs to me!"

With a fierce cry of hot anger, Luther Merrydew leaped to his feet and sprung forward, whipping out a revolver as he did so; but swift as were his actions, the movements of that fiercely-bearded ruffian were still more prompt. And as his leveled revolver exploded, the young man flung up his hands with a choking cry, then fell in a quivering heap!

CHAPTER XV.

TO MAKE A ROMAN HOLIDAY.

MARK BYWATER turned a trifle paler at that interchange of words, but it surely did not come of personal or physical fear. His lips curled visibly as his keen blue eyes shifted to the cowed figure held back by the strong arm of Prince Lucifer.

"Two pledges, and both from lying lips!"

"You shall not— Back, Bruiser!" panted the younger of the pair, struggling for freedom. "I gave him a sacred pledge by my mother's grave, and I'll keep it or—"

"Simmer, kid!" growled the chief, tightening his grip and moving away toward the hidden mouth of the cavern from which Mark's champion must have sprung. "You promised him his life, and that is safe enough for the present. But if Bruiser don't read him a lesson on good manners such as he'll bear in mind for the remainder of his life, then—"

The sentence was cut short by the being addressed breaking away from his grasp, starting back and drawing a revolver as though resolved to defend the cool sport at any and all costs.

With an ugly curse, Prince Lucifer followed, catching the youth, whirling him about and casting him fairly into the arms of his Imps.

"Run him inside, and see that he stays there!"

Not an item was missed by High-water Mark, and that sneering smile only deepened on his handsome face as he noted the end; with hardly a struggle, the youth was forced away, disappearing among the vine-clad bushes growing at the base of the cliff.

"Lesson goes, boss," chuckled the muscular outlaw who had answered to that pugilistic title, seemingly eager to fall to work. "Jest a weenty one in a-b-abs, or the pure quill, 'way past ba-ba, k-e-r, ker?"

"High-school style, Bruiser, and the toughest you've got in stock!"

With a coarse, brutal laugh, the outlaw lifted a hand and removed the black hood from over his head and face, casting it toward one of his fellows, with the grim remark:

"Hold my bonnet, Sal! Ef he does squint at the sweet mug o' me, I'll beat all he sees clean out o' his head—fer keeps!"

High-water Mark never altered his position, that cold smile playing about his lips as he carelessly eyed the face thus laid open to inspection; the heavy, bull-dog features of a genuine bruiser from the lowest grade of criminal life.

"Not much for pretty, but the neatest workman in his peculiar line that you ever run up against, dear fellow," laughed Prince Lucifer, in seeming glee at the prospect of securing satisfaction, even though it come second-hand. "You've tested your tongue; now see if your hands can acquit themselves as well!"

"What if I don't play?"

"Cowed already! Whipped without a blow being struck!" tauntingly laughed Prince Lucifer. "Poor Bruiser! you'll have to go hungry, and I surely thought I was providing you with a glorious feast!"

"Mebbe he don't know what heap fun it is fer to git a lickin' from a chief," hesitated Bruiser, scratching his skull, the coarse bristles giving back an ugly, rasping sound.

"Fun is fun, but it's not genuine when it has to be made to order, after this fashion," coolly uttered Bywater. "I don't know a man living who can appreciate the pure article better than I, but I object to making a holy spectacle of myself simply for the amusement of a pack of mangy footpads."

"Nur I cain't coax ye!" persisted the muscular Imp, lightly balancing himself before that calm figure, his huge fists mutely seconding that invitation. "Come out an' jest see me fer once! Put up them dukes, an' let me show ye— Durn a cur, anyway!"

With a snort of prime disgust, the thug turned toward Prince Lucifer, his brutal face inflamed, his little, deep-set eyes mutely asking just how far he was privileged to venture.

"Spur him up a bit, if you know how, Bruiser," nodded his master. "Anything short of actually killing the cur. I've promised to spare his life, please bear in mind."

"They's jest one thing fer to do 'ith a cur, an'

that's to lead him out o' the ring as n. g.," chuckled the thug, springing forward and landing within easy reach of his adversary. "Whar's yer han'le, critter?"

He made a swift grasp at the shapely nose before him, but failed to connect—for fingers of steel closed about his hairy wrist, and the burly rascal was jerked irresistibly forward.

To come into sharp contact with the body of the cool sport, who turned half-way around, his left arm flung about that bull-neck, bending the ruffian backward, even as he himself bent forward.

A brief struggle, then Bruiser's heels flew up and he was hurled cleanly over the head of his despised adversary, to fall on the broad of his back, a dozen feet away, with a shock that drove an explosive grunt from his astonished carcass.

Prince Lucifer started back with hand on pistol. His Imps uttered cries of wonder and involuntary admiration. But Mark Bywater rose erect and stood with arms folded, his face as calm as before, his voice smooth and even as he uttered:

"Just to show you that the bird can sing, if it likes, worthy rascals, though it declines to pipe up at every fool's command."

"It was an accident—a foul trick!" raged the chief, fairly beside himself at having the tables turned against him once more.

"Played on a foul tool, serving a still fouler master," amended High-water Mark, with a soft laugh that stung far more keenly than if he had answered in the same savagekey. "If he hadn't been but a scapegoat, I'd have broken his back, instead of letting him down so easy."

"You can brag and bluster—"

"Only when caught in company of those who make a living by working that windy lead," curtly interposed the cool hand, his smile vanishing, his big eyes seeming to grow brighter, with a peculiar reddish reflection. "If you think the fall of your clumsy tool was a pure accident, not readily duplicated, what's the matter with putting your faith to the test? While I decline to sing when a menial orders, you're different: I'd rather give you a lesson than any man I know!"

"You cain't— Cl'ar the way, fer I'm a comin'!"

Half-stunned by that heavy fall, with his stolid wits fairly scattered, Bruiser had been slow to regain his footing, and when he did so, he glared stupidly about him for a few seconds, seemingly dazed.

Then he caught the cold, cutting notes, as High-water Mark spoke, and sighting the one who had so easily overthrown him, the bully gave vent to a fierce bellow, rushing headlong at the sport.

There was no chance for escape from that furious charge unless by actual flight, and though High-water Mark objected to performing for the amusement of his captors, he could not well act otherwise, just then.

"Short and sweet—if you will have it!" he grated, with an upper-cut that lifted the head of the bully until his cut and bleeding face was fairly exposed, the shock checking his savage rush.

Swift as thought another blow followed, straight from the shoulder and backed by the solid weight of that athletic body, falling squarely in the middle of that brutal face.

A sickening thud—a spray of red blood—an involuntary groan—then Bruiser clawed spasmodically at the empty air as he toppled over backward.

"You would have it!" gratingly cried the sport, his face white and hard-set. "Sit down and think what an ass you've made of yourself!"

In common with nearly every one who witnessed those two blows, High-water Mark believed the road-agent had received his quietus; but they were underrating his bull-dog grit and physical powers.

He fell with a heavy jar, but rolled over and quickly scrambled to his feet, dashing a hand across his bleeding face to clear his eyes, then again rushing upon his cool antagonist.

"You're a tough nut, pardner!" cried the sport, with involuntary admiration for such blind grit. "Call it a draw, and shake!"

"I ain't licked yit, cuss ye!" sending blow after blow at the face of his retreating adversary, growing still blinder with rage as each stroke was warded off or deftly evaded by duck or dodge. "Ye cain't begin to lick one side o' me! Ef I ever—"

"No, I never!" laughed Mark, sending in a straight shot that closed his jaws with a vicious click and chatter. "I hate to make a chopping-block of a good man, but I'll have to lay you out if you won't listen to reason, Bruiser."

Only Bruiser of all present but saw that the cool sport was perfectly capable of keeping his word in short meter, and none more clearly than Prince Lucifer himself. His hand went up—a lasso was hurled along the ledge, catching the nimble heels of the sport, flinging him heavily to the rock!

"Now Ihev got ye!" viciously snarled Bruiser, leaping upon his treacherously-overthrown foe, murder in his bloodshot eyes!

CHAPTER XVI.

A NEW HAND IN THE GAME.

"WAAL, I'll be jo-hammered ef— Whoa-up, Moses!"

With a vigorous tug at the slack reins, flinging his own body far back in the saddle at the same time, the "solitary horseman" brought his long-eared steed to such an instant halt that its trimmed tail formed a circle upon the rocky trail.

His keen eyes, deep-set and close together, glittered brightly in the last rays of the declining sun as their owner slightly inclined his head, putting his sharpest ear foremost, listening for a repetition of the suspicious sound which had caused such an abrupt change in his sleepy progress.

It came, after a brief interval: dim, indistinct, seeming but a series of faint crackling through the rugged hills; but that listener was too old a mountaineer, too experienced in warfare, to make a mistake.

"Burnin' powder, an' I do reckon the boss wasn't nigh so finicky as I tuck a notion! Might a' knowed he wasn't, fer I never hitched up longside a cleaner bit o' pure grit an' keen hoss-sense as that same— Stiddy, Moses!"

Moses gave vent to something like a cross between a sigh and a melancholy protest, flapping his long ears mournfully as he resumed the uncomfortable attitude into which he had been thrown by that unexpected application of rein and curb-bit.

Moses was a mule, once white as the undrifting snow, but that was in his gay and careless days of early youth; now he was a dirty yellow, with here and there a patch of rusty hide, as though, once reclining in peace, he had grown too lazy to rise in time to save his hair. But in something more than this did Moses resemble the traditional singed cat; and his present owner, "Silver-tip" Sidney Rocket, was free to affirm that he wouldn't swap Moses for a whole herd of common animals; that he could outrun, as well as oversleep, the purest thoroughbred all the world could scratch up to pit against him.

And Moses's master was a fairly fitting complement to Moses's self.

He, too, was grizzled and weather-beaten. He, too, was a great deal better than outward appearances went to declare.

A man of middle size and weight, seeming even shorter from the habitual stoop of his shoulders, and one who had passed his first half-century of life.

He wore a rusty suit of clothes, such as the generality of miners or prospectors favor; a heavy woolen shirt, a pair of coarse overalls made of brown ducking, reinforced with leather and secured by copper rivets; a slouched hat of soft felt, encircled by a stamped leather band; a belt of heavy webbing about his waist, supporting knife and brace of heavy revolvers, besides being liberally supplied with metallic cartridges, suitable for both pistols and the Winchester repeating-rifle which hung in slings alongside the saddle, steadied by his left thigh.

The one difference lay in his foot-gear, for instead of the customary coarse cow or horsehide boots, he wore rude-looking but comfortable moccasins of his own handicraft.

His hair was long, reaching the bowed shoulders, very thick and slightly curling at the lower ends. His face was well-covered by a luxuriant beard that touched his full chest, and in these two items might be found the origin of that queer title of "Silver-tip."

While each strand of hair and beard were jetty black from skin to within an inch of their ends, those tips were almost snowy white. This, together with a well-earned reputation for "pure grit," fighting to the bitter end, regardless of odds and never knowing when he was fairly whipped, caused those who knew him best to name him after the well-known and dreaded cousin to the original grizzly bear.

Silver-tip Sid drew a long breath as no other shot came to his listening ears, and slackening the reins, he permitted Moses to assume a more natural position, greatly to that meek, long-enduring animal's relief.

"Now what?" Rocket asked himself, tugging nervously at his curious beard, his little eyes snapping, his curved nose quivering its thin nostrils. "Shell I lunge right for'ard, bull-headed, the way it comes most nat'ral to a critter, or shell I stick to orders? The boss said— Git up, Moses!"

Hardly that, but Silver-tip Sid was compromising the matter, and choosing a middle course, neither of which fully satisfied him, however.

Just then he was filling a position perfectly new to him, and that reflection caused him to act with more awkwardness than was customary.

"How fur off? Less'n a mild. Fer why: furder'n that, the hills'd 'a' clean swallowed up them echoes 'fore they floated this fur: less, they'd 'a' come clearer an' sharper."

"An' a mild would jest 'bout hit the mouth o' Arrow Kenyon. An' right thar the trail is nar-rer, lined 'ith bushes, on a up-grade; the hull pizen lay-out jest fitted fer sech work as road-agentin'."

"An' bein' a mild, more or less, an' bein' the Imps'll likely hev fun aplenty fer to leave no time fer 'spicionin' odds an' eends comin' either way, why Moses an' me don't hev to shake each other jist yit a weenty bit—eh, lop-ear?"

Moses groaned faintly as though protesting against such an undignified appellation, at the same time shaking his ears by way of emphasis.

For once, however, Silver-tip Sid paid no attention to the actions of his familiar servant and companion. Just then his wits were sorely put to the rack, for he knew not just how to act.

"The boss said ef it did come, I wasn't on no 'count to chip in! I was to pull out an' lay low, ef it took a wheel off! An' I was to pay more 'tention to what he left in my keer, then to him, or to me, or to Moses, or to—durn the luck, any-way!"

He ended with a muffled snort of disgust, jerking Moses upon his haunches, and alighting from the saddle at a point in the trail where it could be abandoned without trouble or much danger of leaving behind any telltale signs for curious eyes to take note of.

Cutting little time to waste, he led his mule deep into the rocks, pausing at a secluded spot some little distance from the stage road, letting Moses stand at ease while he quickly but accurately noted their immediate surroundings.

This mental photograph taken, Silver-tip Sid took a flat package wrapped in oil-skin from an inner pocket, and twisting a wisp of dry grass tightly about it, he lifted one end of a heavy boulder, slipping said parcel under the rock. Lowering this, he looked to see if any tell-tale signs had been left, and finding none, he returned to Moses.

Hitching the mule to a small sapling by the trail-rope secured to its neck, he gave the animal a parting slap as he muttered:

"Ef I don't come back a fore the bones begin fer to stick through the hide o' ye, Moses, old fel', jest chaw that rope loose an' lay in a stock o' fodder; don't ye go hongry, lad, ef ye hev to grind up dornicks fer grub—now don't ye!"

Moses flopped his long ears, opening his huge mouth and showing his teeth. His trimmed tail curved upward, but Rocket shook a warning finger before his eyes, hastily saying:

"Don't ye—don't ye tune up, Moses, pard! Ef ye do, it'd skeer every p'izen road-agent out o' tha'r boots an' out o' the kentry at the same time! An' ef the boss hain't done it afore I git thar, I'm gwine fer to hev a squar' meal, Moses—I'm jest gwine fer to wade in an' teetotally swaller up every pesky critter o' the pot-an'-b'lin'!"

Moses closed his mouth, lowered his tail and head at the same time, but gazing with melancholy reproach into the face of his master; but whether in reproach for checking his farewell tune, or in reproof for that wild gasconading, Silver-tip did not wait to investigate.

Looking to his weapons, making sure they were in perfect working order, he struck out for the stage-trail at a quick trot that covered ground with both ease and rapidity.

Feeling pretty certain that he was not far out of the way in locating the point along the road from which those shots had come, Rocket ran rapidly ahead until drawing near that point; then he took to cover as far as was practicable, until he was near enough to catch a glimpse of the red light reflecting back from the bare rocks high up above the leafy fringe which shut in that part of the road.

Thus warned, Silver-tip crept silently, guardedly up the steep side of the hill, choosing the one opposite the mouth of Arrow Canyon, for obvious reasons, and only pausing when his keen eyes could catch a tolerably fair view of the tableau then presented by the ruddy glow of the bonfire kindled by Prince Lucifer's Imps.

Just in time to see Prince Lucifer go down before that heavy blow from the insult-avenging fist of High-water Mark, though the spy could not see the one who caused that downfall from his present position.

Then came the shot fired by Prince Lucifer, its deadly intent foiled by the swift and plucky action of Miss Mary Jones. But before Silver-tip could fairly comprehend what was going on, and before he could exchange his position for another which gave him a more extended view, the Imps had overpowered and bound Mark Bywater, standing him up with back supported by the boulder.

"The boss!" grated Silver-tip below his breath, silently cocking his rifle and bringing its muzzle forward to cover Prince Lucifer as that worthy rascal once more confronted the cool sport. "I might'a' knowed it! I might'a' bin down thar, helpin' him eat 'em up in a lump, ef I hadn't bin borned a durn fool!"

Despite his mingled rage and chagrin, Sid Rocket was cool enough to take note of the force beyond and below while keeping the head villain covered with his rifle, ready to checkmate any evil move by a bullet. And while making these notes, he saw sufficient to realize the folly of risking an attack, single-handed.

"Ef the boss was loose—ef he could know jest what was comin', an' wouldn't be too pesky mad at me bu'stin' orders all to thunder—wouldn't we chaw 'em up?"

Never in all his long and eventful experience had Silver-tip Sid suffered such a severe test of patience and forbearance as during the long minutes that followed. Time and again he had to relinquish his rifle and clasp both hands behind his back, to resist the temptation.

"Rollick along, double-durn ye all to thunder an' guns!" he grated savagely, his little eyes flaming as vividly as ever had those of his namesake when enraged. "Make the most of it while ye kin, fer the time is comin' when ye won't be able nur hev time to spar! The time is crawlin' on when ye'll ketch a harrycane an' a waterspout an' a yairthquake roiled up in a bunch—ketch it right in the middle o' whar ye live, too!"

If Silver-tip had realized the full import of that capture, and if he could have realized just what was on the docket, he probably would have dared all before permitting Prince Lucifer to carry off the sport whom he for the time being his called "boss."

But he had no particular reason to suspect that this was anything more than an ordinary "hold-up," such as have long since grown part of life in the "wild and woolly" West.

Believing this, and knowing from past experience that life is very seldom taken by road-agents, when they can avoid it without too great risk of losing the coveted treasure, he held his hand until it was too late to make an attempt at rescuing High-water Mark.

Not even when Prince Lucifer bluntly told shrinking Miss Jones that she might go—as his honored guest—did Rocket catch the full meaning of that scene, so adroitly had the road-agents, real or counterfeit, played their rôle of robbers.

But when he saw the Imps pick up his employer to carry him from the stage-trail to where their horses had been left in waiting, then he could no longer doubt.

"Kick me, Moses!" he gasped, staring at the point where Mark Bywater had vanished from his sight. "Kick me fer a b'iled-down idjit o' the fu'st water! Kick me so high the swallers'll build nests in the ha'r o' me 'fore I kin git down ag'in'!"

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW SILVER-TIP RUNG THE BELL.

MORTAL man was never more thoroughly disgusted with himself, yet through it all Silver-tip Sid made no motion, gave no sound through which his presence might be suspected by outlaw or traveler.

Even in his madness the lessons learned by a full quarter of a century of wild life stood him in good stead, muffling his angry notes of disgust, shoeing his feet with silence, casting a cloud over his skulking figure as he crept from the rocks to take the track of the Imps who, under Prince Lucifer, were carrying off his employer and friend.

"Look out fer me, ye pesky critters!" he grated, dangerously. "I'm takin' the trail o' ye, an' I'm a breed that ye cain't throw out by crossin' the scent 'ith blood—mind that, will ye?"

Though having no reason to suspect either Danny O'Toole or his remaining passengers of being over-friendly to the road-agents, Silver-tip used as great precautions to avoid being seen or heard by them as though he knew that information would at once be telegraphed to the chief of the kidnappers.

Reaching the trail, he crossed it some little distance below the spot where the disabled stage stood, crouching low under cover and stealing along without so much as rustling a leaf, until he could slip into the mouth of Arrow Gulch. Then, with a parting glance over his shoulder to where the frost-wrinkled Milesian still occupied the box, volubly counting away as though religiously bound fast until the number indicated by Prince Lucifer should be regularly reached by his nimble tongue, Silver-tip Sid took up the trail.

Here his home-made moccasins came into admirable play, enabling him to press along at a steady lope, without noise enough to alarm the enemy in front or forcing himself to pause in order to note their movements more accurately.

As will be recalled, Sidney Rocket possessed a certain degree of familiarity with that region, and this knowledge enabled him to act with greater ease than might have been the case with one wholly ignorant of the ground before him.

"It's a clean, straight shoot fer nigh a mild, an' so soon a'ter pullin' out, the Imps won't be thinkin' o' lookin' backards," he mused, with swift brain. "An' afore they do, I'm got to make dead sure the boss is 'long o' this gang—I be so!"

That feat was quickly accomplished, though in gaining that knowledge Silver-tip was forced to steal almost close enough to the rear riders of the Imps to touch the tails of their mounts; but then, satisfied that the outlaws had not divided, and that the man whom he had mentally sworn to set at liberty was indeed among them, the scout fell back a short distance, feeling that little could be done while the gang was in motion, yet

holding himself ready to improve the first opportunity that offered itself.

Tireless as a bound, silent as a shadow, Silver-tip Sid followed Prince Lucifer and his Imps through all their windings, never once permitting the rear guard to wholly escape his keen vision, until a halt was called at the base of the high cliff over which, a short time later, the head rascal was to take an abbreviated plunge.

Lying low against the further wall formin' the canyon, Silver-tip watched what followed with intense interest, his little eyes glittering and glowing like the orbs of an aroused snake.

"Wonder ef the pesky critters knows it all!" he mused, casting another keen glance upward, to note where the first reflections of the twin fires were beginning to show themselves. "Ef they does, then it's a stop fer good. Ef they don't, then it's—Stiddy, you!"

A stern self-warning, called forth by seeing Mark Bywater rise to his feet after the road-agents had restored the circulation through his legs. He was strongly tempted to open fire and follow it up by a swift charge upon the enemy as now divided, but once more prudent common sense gained the victory over headlong recklessness.

"Time enough an' more time a-comin'. They're gwine up the hill. Them fires says so. An' they say it's gwine fer to be a stop-thar fer the rest o' the night, anyways. So—Stiddy by jerks, ole hoss!"

Only waiting until he saw Mark Bywater fairly on his way up the winding trail, assisted by his guards, Silver-tip prepared to follow, growling like his surly namesake as he saw this move checkmated by the placing of armed guards over the narrow path.

"Looks like they knowed it pretty much all," the veteran muttered, as he reluctantly beat a retreat, turning his attention to the opposite side of the gulch. "Wonder ef it's just a happen-so, or ef they raally know o' that hole in the wall?"

As much depended on solving this question, Rocket slung his rifle by the strap attached across his shoulders, then rapidly scaled the rocky slope, aiming for a point almost directly opposite that where Prince Lucifer and his evil gang had sought refuge.

Active, supple, sure-footed as a cat, it nevertheless took Silver-tip some little time to accomplish the task he had set himself, and he was barely in time to witness the brief if exciting encounter between High-water Mark and Prince Lucifer.

"Glory to the lad! an' stiddy the rest o' ye all!"

In grim triumph the first words, in fierce warning the last, as he brought his Winchester to a level, finger on trigger, as he only waited to see which outlaw should require the opening shot.

In a direct line, not more than fifty yards separated Silver-tip Sid from Mark Bywater, and at that distance, thanks to the twin fires whose ruddy glow afforded ample light for those practiced eyes to make use of the double sights, the veteran knew that he need not waste a single shot of all that lay in his magazine.

Utterly fearless on his own account, he felt strong concern for his employer, knowing that, even though he himself might come off victor, thanks to his position, death would almost surely overtake Bywater if a single shot was fired. And for this reason he gave a gasp of intense relief when that young champion came between the prisoner and his captors.

Of all that ensued: the menacing mob, the hoarse appeal from Prince Lucifer, the rescue and subsequent events, Silver-tip was an intensely interested observer. And as he noted the cool defiance and unshaken nerve with which High-water Mark faced his foes, time and again the exultant old fellow was forced to cover his lips or grip his throat to choke back a yell of approbation.

"Good Lawd! ef he hain't got a backbone made o' frozen ice, then I don't ax a red copper cent!" he chuckled, squirming about behind his breastwork of rock as though his seat was rapidly growing red-hot.

His jaw drooped a little when Mark yielded up his confiscated weapon, but the old fellow as quickly rallied, more stubborn in his faith than ever, even though matters were taking a decidedly unfavorable turn just then.

And with rifle steadily covering every movement made by the head ruffian, Silver-tip awaited the end without giving a thought to his own share in the adventure.

That would arrange itself without premeditation. All he had to do was to chip in at the right moment, and make his every card take a trick if possible.

"The fools hain't all dead yit—no they ain't, Bruiser!" with a grim chuckle as he witnessed the unmasking of Prince Lucifer's chosen champion. "An' ef you only knowed it—but you'll git thar; like the kid that tried to write his name on the huff o' Moses's brother!"

He almost forgot his rifle as he craned his head forward, drinking in the scene with eyes and ears, talking riskily loud when the subject of "fun" was broached:

"Fun? don't ye think he ain't chuck-full of it—don't ye do it ef ye don't want fer to git so pesky bad fooled that ye'll never git over it this side o'— Didn't I tell ye so?"

Bruiser reached out to tweak the nose of the cool sport, only to be flung end-for-end, as described. And Silver-tip laughed aloud in reckless glee, feeling far prouder of that exploit than if he had performed it himself.

He caught his breath sharply as Bruiser recovered to make that bull-dog rush, but as High-water Mark once more checkmated him, the old fellow fairly hugged himself in pure ecstasy, keeping track of all the rest with too intense an interest to admit of running comments, up to the moment when High-water Mark felt forced to end the matter despite his reluctance to further punish a gritty adversary.

"A tough nut, sure-ly, but ye've got to go cracked, Bruiser, an'— *Look out, pard!*" in fierce warning as his restless eyes detected that dastardly attempt with the lasso from the gloom behind the sport.

Instantly his rifle came to the front, and as Bruiser, maddened by his wounds, leaped upon the fallen man with a bared knife flashing in the red light, Silver-tip sent a ball crashing through that half-crazed brain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PRINCE LUCIFER PRESSES HIS POINT.

THOUGH there had been no time to dwell upon his aim, Silver-tip Sid never made a truer center-shot in all his life than he did on that occasion.

Straight through that thick skull the missile crashed its way, instantly producing death, paralyzing those strained muscles as swiftly and as surely as though a bolt of lightning had expended its full force upon that bristle-crowned head.

The uplifted knife, already on the point of falling, dropped with a clatter to the rock level beside Mark Bywater, who instantly cast off that drooping mass of death, leaping to his feet and kicking off the noose which still encircled his ankle.

All was confusion the most intense for a single breath, for Silver-tip Sid, with hearty good will, was sending bullet after bullet into the ranks of the astonished outlaws, among whom only Prince Lucifer seemed to retain his wonted coolness.

With a cat-like leap that carried him out of line from the bullet intended for himself, the chief caught Mark from behind, pinning both arms to his sides, whirling him back into the bushes before the other could fairly recover his balance on arising.

"Scatter, ye Imps!" he thundered, viciously. "Riddle that devil over the way— Take him in or answer to me for failing!"

"Father—he is not—you have him safe?" cried a sharp yet unsteady voice as a bright light flashed upon the two men, still locked in a tight embrace, though Mark Bywater, half-stunned by that treacherous fall, and taken so at a disadvantage, was unable to effect much.

"Quick!" panted Prince Lucifer, tripping his captive, both falling heavily. "Pin him fast, or I'll have to kill the fool, even yet!"

Two stout fellows came to the rescue, and between them all, Mark Bywater was soon helplessly hampered, hands and feet, lying once more at the mercy of his cowled foes.

Prince Lucifer left him thus for a brief space, rushing back to the ledge, where his men were sending bullets in swift succession toward the point from whence Silver-tip had sped that death-shot.

"Lead out and take him—dead or alive!" viciously cried their leader, noting the significant fact that no answering shots came from the slope opposite. "On your lives don't let him get away! Take him, dead or living!"

Two of the road-agents had fallen, dead or disabled, while more than one other had received smarting tokens of the unknown's skill at swift shooting by night; but all who were able to do so started off in a hot run to carry out those fierce orders. And only for their cooler-brained chief, the ledge and its winding trail would have been left entirely without a guard.

Checking several on whom he could depend, Prince Lucifer bade them keep watch and ward, urging the others to hot pursuit, stimulating them by promising a rich reward to all who might take part in killing or capturing the audacious marksman who had so seriously disarranged his cherished plans.

Brief though his absence had been, Prince Lucifer found that the one whom he claimed as a son had not been idle, on his return to the cavern, into the screened mouth of which he had forced Mark Bywater.

Though the cool sport was left in bonds, he had been lifted from the ground, carried along the narrow passage and into a large chamber hollowed by the hand of nature out of the solid rock.

A wood fire blazed at one side of the chamber, and a number of candles were lighted and stuck to rock-points projecting from the irregular walls. Still others stood upon a rude puncheon-table near the center of the apartment, and

seated on a backless stool beside this table was High-water Mark.

His pale face was slightly marred by dust, and a trace of blood showed where one cheek had come in contact with the ledge when he was so treacherously overthrown by that deftly-handled lasso.

Aside from this slight memento, he had passed unscathed through his recent battle.

Prince Lucifer noted his son standing opposite the captive, with two stout fellows a little to the rear of the sport. To the latter pair he curtly spoke:

"Go and help your mates find the devil who killed poor Bruiser."

"Who fired that shot, Mark Bywater?"

"Why do you ask me?"

"Because you must know. Who fired that shot, I say?"

"Keep on saying it, and spare me the trouble."

"It was a friend of yours—"

"Whom I'll thank when I see him. Don't you think he deserves it?"

"When you see him he'll be food for the buzzards, so full of lead that you might file a mineral claim on his carcass!" viciously grated the road-agent, his eyes flashing redly through the holes in his hood.

"It's catching before hanging, remember, old sinner," lightly retorted High-water Mark, showing no signs of discomposure at that only too probable threat.

"My lads are after him now. They're true-bred bloodhounds, and he couldn't escape them though endowed with wings! Inside of half an hour they'll bring him in, dead or living!"

"Then why bore me with asking information which is so sure to reach you?"

"Because you must know who the devil is, and—"

"The devil will get no information from me. Finis."

Mark Bywater locked his jaws, coldly meeting that angry glare, not a muscle of his countenance changing. And by this time Prince Lucifer had learned enough of his nature to see the utter folly of attempting to extract by force of threats what was refused by free will.

"Let it pass, father," muttered his son, resting a hand on the arm of the chief. "As you say, 'tis only a matter of time. The assassin cannot escape our bully boys once they strike his track. And then—don't forget that there are still more important matters undecided."

"You're right enough, kid," with a long breath that seemed to take away with it all anger. "Kick that stool this way—thanks!"

He sat down, leaning both elbows on the rough slab between himself and the prisoner, supporting his cowled chin by his joined palms, gazing fixedly into that stern-set face opposite.

"I've played the fool, Bywater, in giving you so much slack-rope, but I fancied you would handle the easier for being humored a bit. I see my mistake now. What you need is a touch of the thumb-screws."

He paused as though expecting a reply of some sort, but none came. Those big, blue eyes never wavered. Those strong jaws remained locked.

"You wasn't born an idiot, young fellow, and you've seen enough of rough life since your beard sprouted to be able to guess the manner of man I am."

"Man is no name for it," coldly interposed Bywater.

"Devil, then, if you reckon the term suits better. And when I say that you've got to bend or to break, you can give a fairly close guess as to what that assertion implies."

"All of which preludes?"

"The alternative I set before you at the send-off: which will you elect—a bullet or a bride?"

A sudden change came into the face of his prisoner, which even those keen eyes failed to wholly understand. Mark actually blushed, his lids drooping with a shyness equal to that of a coy maiden when pressed on a delicate point.

"Don't crowd a poor devil too awfully hard, Captain Cut-throat!" he murmured, his tones low and seemingly deeply embarrassed.

"Don't make me crowd you into a pine box!" frowned Prince Lucifer, with an ugly suspicion that he was being chaffed by the man whom he felt to be wholly at his mercy, for good or evil. "Make your election, in a single mouthful! Swear to marry the woman I bring forward, or prepare yourself for death!"

"You are cruel—positively cruel, dear sir," reproachfully murmured the cool sport, lifting his lashes until those bright eyes could reach the level of the glittering orbs behind that cowl.

"You say that in clumsy jest, but I'll prove it in deadly earnest unless you come down!" harshly growled the outlaw, his gloved hands clinching wickedly. "Yes, or no? Out with it, Mark Bywater!"

"It's an awful temptation to fling before a

poor devil, don't you know? A bullet is mighty indigestible fodder. Death is a cold and uncomfortable bedfellow. A wife—well, as an honest man, I'll tell you just how the case stands, captain: I'm already provided!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm already married. I have a wife. I'm father to three darling little kids, each and every one of whom would aver their daddy was actually a goat if he dared smuggle another charming wife into the home circle!"

Prince Lucifer broke into a harsh, sneering laugh, a gloved hand striking the rude table violently as he cried:

"Such a clumsy lie won't save you, Mark Bywater! You have neither wife nor kids. You are single now, and you ever have been."

High-water Mark smiled blandly, but with a curious twinkle coming into his blue eyes as they noted how deeply interested that masked youth appeared to be in the dispute.

Catching that glance, the youth drew back a pace, one gloved hand swiftly lifting as though its owner forgot for the instant that his face needed no further covering.

Prince Lucifer paused but for a moment, then added, in calmer tones:

"I know what I say, Mark Bywater. I can trace your life from early boyhood up to date. I know that you never married. I know that there is not the slightest obstacle in the way of the marriage ceremony which I have sworn to bring about."

"For why, if it's a fair question?" languidly interposed Mark, but more with the air of one who feels some slight show of interest is expected of him, rather than actually experiencing that sensation.

"Your bride shall answer that query, after the knot is tied beyond the power of loosing. It ought to be enough for you to know now that through this ceremony alone can you hope to regain your liberty—"

"Locked, padlocked, key thrown away! Rather queer definition of liberty, don't you think, dear fellow!" grimly laughed Bywater.

"Your only hope of regaining your liberty or of saving your life, I started to say," steadily persisted the outlaw leader. "You persist in trying to treat it as a jest, but that's played out. I'm in cold, matter-of-fact earnest, and unless you agree to be guided wholly by my wishes—unless you swear to marry the lady whom I'll shortly present to you—death!"

"And destruction!" echoed Mark, with awed exaggeration.

"You are single now," steadily pursued Prince Lucifer, plainly resolved to reach a thorough understanding, despite those annoying interruptions. "You will be double before the sun rises, or you'll be rich food for the worms!"

"It's all I can do to starve to death single; how much harder if I'm in duplicate!" faintly sighed the cool sport.

"I've drawn the picture for you, clearly enough, Mark Bywater. Now choose; will you accept the bride I offer you? In one word!"

High-water Mark grew grave, heaving a sigh so deep that it seemed to come from his very boots. And his tones were melancholy personified as he softly breathed:

"Oh, if I had only been born lucky instead of so sweet and bewitching! If I were gifted with wrinkles and a pink wart on the tip of my nose! Then I wouldn't have had to flout a fair maiden—your own delicious daughter, may I ask?" with a pointed bow toward the more youthful mask.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WILL OF PAUL SOLANDER.

PRINCE LUCIFER gave a slight but perceptible start and half-turned as though to follow the glance which bore that bow company; but if so, he checked the impulse, sharply uttering:

"I have no daughter."

"Then this lady is—"

High-water Mark left the sentence incomplete, but pointed it so distinctly that the chief could no longer afford or affect to ignore his meaning.

"Are you really a fool, or are you simply playing at the title?" he cried, after a passing glance around the chamber, as though he felt it barely possible that another person had intruded upon them. "There is no lady here, I tell you!"

Mark arched his brows, pursing his red lips as though strongly tempted to utter a low whistle as his eyes passed from one black hood to the other. Instead, he muttered, softly:

"Neither daughter nor lady! Then—it must be my bitter dose!"

"What are you trying to get through you, buffoon?" sharply growled the masked outlaw. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that form is too elegant to rightfully go with beard, boots and breeches," laughing with a half-sneer as his blue eyes passed up and down the tell-tale curves, even more pronounced now that the younger mask shrunk back from the rude table with a low cry of mingled rage and mortification, cut short by a swift gesture

from the hand of Prince Lucifer, who coldly cried:

"You're worse than an idiot, Mark Bywater!"

"Yet wise enough to tell fish from flesh; wise enough to distinguish hawk from dove," with a repetition of that irritating laugh. "Now I know why my fair fellow-passenger was so ready to risk her sweet life in defense of poor me; a case of love at first sight, yet—"

Another stifled cry—almost an oath—from those cowled lips in the shadow, and there came a brief glitter of bared steel as one gloved hand quivered before his—or her—bosom.

"Peace, kid!" sharply cried Prince Lucifer, with a stern gesture. "As for you, Mark Bywater, it's no easy task to decide which title fits you closest: ass or coxcomb!"

"Either likes me better than stupid dupe; and having said enough to let you see that my eyes are at least half-open, get down to sober business just as soon as you see fit. I'll hold my end level, or snap a tug in trying to get there."

Prince Lucifer made no immediate response, apparently taken by surprise, not expecting such a sudden and complete change of base. But then he bluntly asked:

"Did you ever hear of a certain man called Paul Solander?"

"I have heard of Oran Solander, who had a son Calvin, and a daughter Ruby. Possibly they were relatives to the gentleman you name?"

"Possibly, as you say," coldly uttered the outlaw, showing no signs of surprise or anger, though the deliberate speaker watched keenly for some such evidence. "I have nothing to do with either of them. Just at present my interest is confined to Paul."

"Paul goes, then? What was he? Anything in this line?"

"Meaning the road-agent business?" adding, with a short, ugly laugh: "Not precisely, though he was a robber; of the vilest sort, since he stole from his own blood to lavish wealth upon aliens!"

"Evidently a man of sound sense and keen judgment, saving your presence," laughed the prisoner, his blue eyes twinkling. "Nay, man, don't shy at my nimble tongue; I was born that way!"

"Look out or your tongue will bring about your death!" growled Prince Lucifer, plainly stung to the quick. "You're playing with fire that asks only a single puff to turn into your winding-sheet!"

"Which puff you'll never give, so long as your—the lady kept so carefully in the background lacks a convenient husband. "But jesting isn't business; stick to the plain text, captain, and don't go hopping all over the page—please!"

To hear that long drawn-out word, one would have deemed the speaker terribly imposed upon, instead of being the owner of the straying organ; and though he evidently strove hard to conceal the fact, Prince Lucifer was surely growing more and more irritated.

He had plotted and planned so long and so carefully. He had provided for every possible emergency long before it could arise to give him trouble. He had spent money like pouring out water. He had gone under the grim shadow of the scaffold itself in his stern resolve to come out winner in the end.

So far complete success had crowned his efforts, but with one important card in his grip, he found it stuck tightly to his fingers, just when he ought to play it most swiftly!

Only by a desperate effort could he school his boiling temper, but he succeeded in part, speaking rapidly, doggedly at first.

There was such a man; Paul Solander. He never married. He seemed to live for the sole purpose of amassing a vast fortune, and though fate baffled his earlier efforts, when old age began to frost his head, the tide began to turn with it.

"He left his Eastern home, going West. He entered the mining regions, and for many years was lost sight of entirely; that is, so far as the few relatives and fewer friends whom he had left behind were concerned."

"Oran Solander, Son, Daughter & Co.," murmured Mark, but without receiving any notice from his captor.

"Then, at last, word began to float about that Paul Solander had struck it marvelously rich; that he was growing into a manifold millionaire from his mining ventures, though no one else seemed to know just where those bonanzas were located.

"Then word flew around that Paul Solander was dead! And in the same breath people began to talk over and marvel at the strange will which the crazy fool had left behind him!"

"Titles bestowed by—How easy to guess!" softly murmured High-water Mark, his blue eyes twinkling maliciously.

"It would be a waste of breath to tell you the whole affair, item by item," steadily resumed Prince Lucifer, at last steeled against those careless yet keen shafts. "Enough to say that the will was located, proven genuine, and its contents made known to those more nearly concerned."

"Good lawyers pronounced it unbreakable,

unless lunacy at the date of signing the will could be positively proven against the testator. The witnesses were found, and swore positively that Paul Solander, at the date of making that will, was perfectly sane; and as both witnesses were reputable physicians—one of them well known as an expert on madness—all efforts at breaking the will were in vain.

"So much by way of preface: now to mention the points which more nearly concern you and us, Mark Bywater!

"Paul Solander divided his fortune—called millions, though no figures were actually named—into two equal parts. One was to fall to Mark Bywater. The other was to go to Una Freestone. This on certain conditions, mind you!"

"One condition, and the main one, as you know well enough, was that the young people named should meet, learn to know and love each other, then become man and wife with full and free consent of both. In case one of the pair should refuse to obey this condition, his or her share of the fortune was to descend to certain named charities. If both were equally at fault, the whole fortune was to be so diverted. In no case was one solitary dollar of all his wealth to reach the hands of his blood relatives, whom he named in full."

"Yet you—those relatives—tried to make the gentleman out a lunatic?" cried Mark, in tones of mock wonder.

"They were just so foolish," with a grim nod of his cowled head. "They failed, though backed by the charities named. Possibly they might have succeeded though, had the officers of said charities been able to locate those millions. When all efforts in that direction failed: for not even the witnesses could give a hint as to the repository to which Paul Solander had confided his wealth; they abandoned the struggle, lying low for a better opening, no doubt!"

"Wiser than you—or his relatives, of course," with an apologetic bow for the slip, "who still persist in chasing the phantom of gold!"

"That was long years ago, when you and the girl were children. Now you are quite old enough to speak for yourself, Mark Bywater, and I ask you again: Which do you choose for a bride? Una Freestone or grim death?"

Before an answer could possibly be given, a bustle at the entrance arose, and as all eyes turned quickly in that direction, Mark Bywater sprung to his feet with a sharp cry, shrinking back with the words:

"Look! my God! is it a spirit?"

CHAPTER XX.

FARCE OR TRAGEDY?

CHECKED in his fierce leap to defend his loved one, Luther Merrydew flung up his arms, turned half-way around, then fell heavily to the earth, the red firelight flickering over his quivering body.

Andrew Merrydew gave a choking cry of mingled fear and horror, cowering close to the ground, much as he had when the King of the Mountains hurled his assailant to what seemed death or broken bones.

Pritty Poll uttered an ugly oath as he leaped to his feet, only to go down before several of those rough-clad figures who so promptly carried out the harsh orders of the ruslian whose hand was tearing open the flap before the little white tent in which Una Freestone had retired.

"Wipe out all who kick, but—Hollow, sweetness?" in coarse admiration as the maiden suddenly confronted him, her eyes wide with alarm, as yet failing to fully comprehend what had so abruptly broken in upon her slumbers.

With a coarse laugh, the ruslian dropped the curtain to grasp the frightened prize that showed itself, heedless of her gasping shriek and instinctive recoil.

That ery, added to the sight of the poor girl feebly struggling in the clutches of the hairy-faced rascal, seemed to nerve the old lawyer to desperation, for with a loud cry he sprung to his feet and rushed forward, shaking his clinched fists as he cried out:

"Unhand her, you demon! Kill me—come death in horrid shape, but harm not a single hair of that fair head!"

The burly rascal seemed taken by surprise, burdened as he was by that struggling captive, and Andrew Merrydew, like an enraged lion defending its helpless young, leaped at his throat.

"You ole fool!" snarled the villain, flinging Una back into the tent with one hand, even as he received and foiled that impetuous assault with the other. "I'll jump the oil clean out o' yer fat karkiss in a holy minnit!"

"Kill me—butcher me—tear me limb from limb!" gasped the old gladiator, his stumpy arms too short to reach that hairy throat so long as that weaver's-beam of an arm continued rigid. "But spare that innocent child who—Ugh!—ahg-gh-h-h!"

"Shet clam—you!" growled the ruslian, bringing a second hand to assist in choking the valiant lawyer into subjection. "I ain't no butcher, ef you be a fat hog! I don't want to spile my record by killin' sech a critter, but ef I hev to do it, why—Got 'nough, hey?"

His fat face turning purple, Andrew Merrydew ceased his vain struggles, flinging up his

arms and working his fat fingers spasmodically as his only method of imploring quarter. And with that contemptuous laugh, the athletic ruslian gave him a push that sent him reeling away, to trip over groaning Telescop Charley and sit down with a jar that served to completely empty his laboring lungs of the scant amount of breath left them by those garroting fingers.

"Set down—tub o' grease!" laughed the rascal, adding insult to injury, his tones changing to grim bloodthirstiness as he added: "Slit his fool's throat ef he gits to chawin' soap, ag'in, lad!"

"Bet we jest will, boss!" promptly cried the fellows who were in the act of rising from the motionless figure of Pritty Poll, whom they had apparently "laid out" for all time. "You look to the gal, an' leave us to 'tend to t'others."

Seemingly with perfect confidence in his fellows, the leading ruslian turned and entered the tent, just as poor Una, half-stunned by this fresh misfortune, was rising from the pallet upon which she had fallen after that sudden fling.

"Now don't hev a fit an'step into it, ma'am," bluntly cried the rascal, though he scowled blackly as he saw how the maiden shrunk away from him in terror. "They ain't no harm'tend-ed fer you, ef you'll jest try to show a weeny bit o' hoss-sense. To simmer it down to a keen p'int, we're the best friends you've got in seventeen States, ef you only knowed it—bet we be, pritty!"

"Don't—pray don't touch me!" gasped Una, hardly conscious of her words, but shrinking in horror from that extended hand.

"Waal, ef you hain't got the gall!" snarled the rascal, his face flushing hotly, his eyes glowing under their shaggy brows. "Don't tetch me, ob? 'Don't' be blamed when I've got my orders—an' them calls fer a mighty heap sight o' tetchin', ye want to know?"

Without regarding the poor girl's struggles, faint and vain, for repeated shocks had sorely broken her usual spirit and sapped her physical powers, he caught her arms, lifting her to her feet, then passing an arm about her waist as a more convenient support.

"Now you jest brush the dust out o' them pritty peepers o' yourn a bit, ma'am," he said, speaking slowly, making sure that the girl fully comprehended him as he went along. "Jest wake up an' try fer to git a glimp' o' solid facts through the head o' ye, 'fore we make another break. You kin hear me, I reckon?"

"Yes, but I don't—what does it all mean?"

"It means that you've got heap sight more fri'nds afoot then you hed any notion, when you lit out through this wooden kentry," laughed her captor, shrewd enough to see that he was by no means wasting time in vain, since each moment in passing helped to lessen the effects of that sudden fright. "It means that you've drapped right down into the middle of a big pot o' bigger luck, an'—feelin' a bit stiddyer, I reckon, ain't ye?"

"Enough so to stand alone," was the unexpected response, as she freed her waist from his careless embrace. "If I am your prisoner, bind me fast, but spare me your touch, as much as possible."

Instead of the angry outburst which she anticipated from the rascal, he nodded his approval with a broad grin.

"That's the ticket, ma'am, an' ef you keep on 'provin' as fast as you've begun, we'll get on snugger then six in a bed 'ith three in the middle!"

"And my friends? You have not—they are safe?" asked Una, her voice breaking, her shivering fit returning as she recalled the ominous sounds which had come to her ears while still bewildered with sleep and sudden waking.

"You is you, but they is dif'rent," gruffly uttered the fellow, a hand closing on her arm as she started to leave the tent. "What they got is what they 'vited o' thar own free will."

Una caught at the loose flap and pulled it open far enough to afford her a glimpse of the camp-ground lighted up by the cheery fire.

She saw Andrew Merrydew sitting up, groaning as though in bodily as well as mental agony, and just beyond him she distinguished the motionless form of Luther Merrydew, who had not moved since he went down before that pistol-shot.

"Dead—you murdered him!" she gasped, trying to break his grip and flee—to save herself or to aid the suffering, can only be guessed at; but the ruslian foiled her efforts, flinging an arm about her waist, lifting her clear of the ground, leaving the tent and passing away beyond the circle of illumination before pausing.

Then he gave a shrill whistle, which found an immediate echo, followed closely by the trampling of hoofs on the flinty soil. And almost immediately a man brought a saddle-horse to where the fellow stood with his captive.

Dim though the light was, and intense her mental trouble, Una noted the startling fact that the animal was provided with a side-saddle, thus plainly proving that her capture had been deliberately planned!

"Wait a bit, pard," nodded her captor—then speaking to the maiden in short, curt tones: "You showed a weenty bit o' solid hoss-sense,

back thar. Kin you match it now? Ef so—it'll come heap sight easier on all two both o' us."

"My friends—poor guardian!" gasped Una, hardly capable of speech, so intense were her emotions.

"Ef you mean the ole gent, he's right as a trivet, an' ef you make a p'int of it, he shell keep you comp'ny in the ride that's afore ye. As fer the young feller—"

"You killed him!"

"Ef be hes cashed in, what made him chip so pesky brash?" with a sullen ferocity that sent a shiver through her person. "What made him show his teeth, leppin' at the throat o' me wuss'n a mad wolf? An' then—what right hed the durn fool to set his eyes so high? Who give him license fer to pick the plum his master hes bin watchin' turn ripe?"

Just then a faint cry came from the camp, plainly recognizable as the voice of Luther Merrydew, and with a glad ejaculation Una half-turned to rush to his aid; but that ready hand once more arrested her steps, the fellow speaking rapidly:

"The boys 'll look to him, ma'am, an' he'll git all the better treatment fer your lettin' 'em be free swing. Besides, they's a long an' rough ride ahead o' ye, an' the quicker we set out, the quicker we'll find rest."

Catching her trim waist with both hands, the fellow lightly swung the maiden into the side-saddle, retaining his grip while adding:

"It's a snug seat an' a good critter, ma'am. He'll tote ye like a cradle ef you give him hafe a show. It's you to decide: shell I jump up ahind an' hold ye on, or will ye play a lone hand fer yerself?"

"There is no choice? I must go?" faltered the maiden.

"Jest as sartain as them stars is winkin' at ye from the blue," was the prompt response. "Come, little woman, brace up, an' ef it'll be any help to ye, I'll take both ole man an' young feller 'long too!"

"If you only will!" panted Una, gaining strength from that poor hope and gathering up the loose-lying reins in token of her acceptance.

"You shell hear fer yourself, ma'am," with a gratified chuckle as he ordered the man who had brought Una's steed to hurry up his mates.

He led her horse a short distance, until near an animal which he quickly mounted. But greatly to the poor girl's relief, he went no further, silently awaiting the coming of his mates and the other prisoners.

"My darling!" huskily ejaculated Luther, only to have a heavy hand cross his lips with the stern words:

"Hold yer hush, critter, 'less ye're hongry fer a chaw o' rawhide! No talkin' 'lowed—understand?"

The young man, bound hand and foot, the latter members being tied together by a rope passing under the belly of the horse he bestrode, tried to say no more, and Una contented herself with giving son and father sympathetic glances before permitting the chief rascal to lead her on in advance of her companions in misfortune.

He had told no more than the simple truth in saying that there was a long and rough ride before her, but Una bore up far better than might have been expected. She made no plaint, gave no sign of fear or weariness, mutely submitting to that guiding hand and the uncomfarts of that night ride.

More than once her especial guard craned his neck and peered curiously into her pale face, evidently suspecting some dangerous trickery on her part, for he could account for her manner in no other fashion. But in this he was widely off the truth.

Una had been called upon to undergo so much—trials, perils, surprises had followed so swiftly on each other's heels since the warning drop of that stone in the pass—that her sensibilities had become blunted, or numbed.

Though she dimly felt that a new and possibly worse peril menaced her now, she was too nearly stupefied to make an effort to escape it.

Without pause for rest or breathing their horses, the captors pressed on through the night, much of the time crossing ground where anything faster than a walk was impracticable for their horses, but improving each bit of smoother ground to the best advantage. And then, after following a fairly smooth level through frowning cliffs for a considerable distance, the stern challenge rung out:

"Halt! show cause, or down ye go in a heap!"

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW THEY HUNTED A SILVER-TIP.

THERE was no time for Sidney Rocket to weigh the situation; Mark Bywater was lying helplessly at the mercy of the burly road-agent, whose gleaming steel was already quivering with impatience as those bleared and bruised eyes marked the spot below which that bold heart was throbbing.

Only an expert could have sent a bullet across in time to check that vicious intent, but Silver-tip owned no superior in the art of snap-shooting, and his bullet sped true to its mark.

Not until he did this—not until he saw Bruiser fall sluggishly over the man whom he had meant

to butcher—did Silver-tip give even a passing thought as to the consequences which must almost certainly follow that shot.

"All right! then we'll bev our fun while the bag's open!" he grimly laughed, turning his rifle toward the clustering gang of road-agents, held as by a spell for the moment.

His repeater rung out merrily enough, and the crowd scattered with wild cries of angry afright, instinctively seeking cover even while glaring around in quest of that audacious sharpshooter.

"Up on the own two legs o' him!" exultantly breathed Silver-tip Sid as he saw Mark Bywater fling aside that burly corpse and stagger to his feet. "Make a break fer it while they're all muddled up, boss! Ye kin do it—jest as easy!"

He was strongly tempted to hurl this advice across the open space at the top of his lungs, but managed to refrain. To do so would only be to put the rascals on guard against the effort which, with each passing moment, he expected to see High-water Mark put forth of his own accord; but he failed to take into consideration that ugly fall through the tripping lasso, which had temporarily stunned and confused the cool sport.

In that hasty skurrying about, Silver-tip Sid had lost sight of the member who he felt pretty sure stood at the head of the evil gang, and it was no easy matter to regain that clew, thanks to the family resemblance in dress.

To this fact alone Prince Lucifer owed his life, and to an accident he owed it once more when he leaped upon High-water Mark.

One of the road-agents, cooler-headed than his fellows, caught sight of that rapid fire-puff across the way, and at once began to return the compliment in kind. And just as Silver-tip Sid was in the act of pulling the trigger, his rifle covering the leap of Prince Lucifer, one of those hasty bullets struck the rock across which the veteran was leaning, casting sharp splinters of stone and bits of battered lead into his hands and face.

Instinctively Silver-tip flinched an atom; hardly more, but yet enough, when added to the swift motion of his target, to foil his aim.

"Devil star's by ye!" he snarled, jerking the lever as he saw his employer grasped by the man he had missed. "But I'll—"

The last fired shell "jammed," and refused to be extracted!

Dropping the temporarily disabled repeating-rifle, Silver-tip snatched a revolver from its scabbard, but brief as had been the delay, it was fatal to his hopes of freeing High-water Mark, on that occasion at least.

Prince Lucifer had whirled the half-stunned sport around and back through the bushes which veiled the cave entrance.

By this time, too, the Imps had rallied a bit, opening fire in that direction, their lead hissing and spattering and zipping about with reckless disregard for the consequences; and feeling that he had reached the extent of his usefulness to Mark in that direct line, Rocket began to take thought for himself.

Squatting close down behind his rocky breast-work, he made sure that his rifle would not work until receiving more care than he could well afford to spare it, just then.

"Which says that the sooner the ole man begins fer to hunt his hole, the less li'ble he is fer to hev to yank it in a'fer him to keep out onmannerly comp'ny!" grimly decided the veteran, slipping his head through the stout leather strap and tightening it so that the weapon would hang snug and close while its master was in hasty flight.

He saw Prince Lucifer come forth with stern commands for his Imps to effect the capture of the daring sharpshooter, and as the irregular firing ceased at the same time, he rose erect and coolly took a survey of the situation.

There was no particular hurry. The road-agents must descend by that winding path, then find a point by which the other steep could be scaled; and this would be no slight task in the darkness which reigned in that deep gulch, unless those in pursuit were well acquainted with the nature of the ground.

"An' even then the ole man kin 'low ye p'ints an' a discount!" grimly chuckled Silver-tip, following the movements of his enemies as well as the uncertain light would admit.

Apparently the spy felt perfectly confident that he could foil his enemies, despite their numbers and the fact that he was, as it were, upon their own stamping-grounds.

He waited until he knew that the Imps had reached the bottom of the gulch, and though his eyesight could avail him but little, looking downward into that darkness, he used his keen ears to such good effect that he knew his enemies had scattered up and down the gulch, before attempting to mount that hillside, the more surely to intercept the one who they felt positive was already seeking safety in flight.

"Cold meat or hot, eh?" grimly mused the veteran, tightening his belt a notch as he concluded his examination. "Mighty easy satisfied, ain't ye? Wouldn't kick ef— But I'mbettin' big dollars 'ginst little coppers that they ain't one o' the outfit as'll try fer to

ketch ole Silver-tip 'ith wind into his belters!"

With a backward glance that showed a strong reluctance to leave without fully disposing of his employer's worst enemy, Silver-tip Sid passed from behind his rocky breastwork, making his way lightly up the rugged mountain-side, taking an angling course as being more practicable.

"They'll be double sure fer to rake all over that spot 'ith a fine comb," he reflected, as though feeling the need of some fair excuse for his beating a retreat, even against such heavy odds. "They'll hope ag'in' hope that I let up bu'stin' caps jest because I couldn't keep it up no longer. They'll hug it to tha'r buzzoms that some o' tha'r loose lead tuck me right whar I lived, an' laid me out too dead to skin 'thout a fresh scald!"

"Waal, ef I hed more time to waste I'd like to be thar or tharabouts fer to count up how durned disa'p'nted they'll be when they come to find what they cain't find—I jest would, fer a fact!"

Chuckling to himself over the picture his lively imagination drew for the occasion, Silver-tip kept on his way, pausing at intervals to look and listen, but steadily working his way further up the slope and further around the huge semicircle which the range formed at that point.

He had still another object in taking that particular course, but before he had proceeded very far, that object proved to be a failure on its very face.

It will be remembered that, on reaching the base of the cliff, the road-agents alighted, sending half of their number with all of the horses up the gulch to apparently enter the solid rock wall.

Instead of so doing, the Imps passed easily around a sharp elbow in the cliff, and following the gulch for a considerable distance further, reached a trail leading up to the very ledge or shelf back of which lay hidden that curious cavern utilized by Prince Lucifer.

The trail was practicable for horses, and the animals were led up out of the gulch, to be herded above until their services were required again.

"Yit I mought 'a' known it, ef I'd stopped fer to take a second think-it-over," growled Silver-tip Sid, in disgust, as he noted the animals opposite. "Course they's some o' the durned critters playin' hoss-guard, an' the racket'll set 'em on the keen lookout. That settles one idee, but tha'r heap sight more whar that come from—good luck!"

Foiled in his hopes of gaining the ledge unseen and unsuspected by that trail, Silver-tip Sid turned back a short distance, then looked about for some secure hiding-place where he might laugh to scorn the blind efforts of Prince Lucifer's Imps to discover the sharpshooter to whom Bruiser owed his death.

There was no lack of cover, and Silver-tip at length selected one, settling down in it as cool and steady-nerved as though he could not even then hear half a score bitter enemies searching the rocks for him.

Nearer and nearer came those sounds, until the old fellow realized that he was actually surrounded by the outlaws. And just when perfect silence seemed most essential to safety, a dark figure paused directly in front of his hiding-place, with a sharp note of suspicion!

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW SILVER-TIP WHETTED HIS KNIFE.

WHETHER or no the intruder really caught sight of the one for whom he and his evil mates were so enerly seeking, Silver-tip Sid did not pause to ask or to consider.

Swift as thought and certain as fate, his sinewy hands shot out, to close in a terrible grip about the throat of the road-agent, cutting short that ejaculation in its birth, jerking the surprised rascal headlong into the rocky recess.

"Stiddy by jerks!" muttered the veteran as he quickly shifted his own position to add his weight to the hint thus given the Imp that perfect silence was the order of the night. "Lay down an' ketch forty winks—you!"

Hands, body, knees, every member of his person, every ounce of his weight and a goodly share of his strength, all were called into action and devoted to silencing the ruffian without actually killing him.

And as he held his prisoner helpless, Silver-tip strained his ears to note if, perchance, the other Imps had taken the alarm from that incomplete exclamation.

He could hear, indistinctly, more than one of the road-agents moving about, groping their way through the thick-lying rocks and mighty boulders, where shadows lay thick and gloomy.

He could catch an occasional oath as an incautious step resulted in trip or stumble or barked shin. He could hear one rascal call to a mate, and distinctly noted each word of the disgusted answer:

"Not a durned smell, nur we never will, up this way! The p'izen critter tuck t'other way—made a skoot fer the level, an' he's many a long mile out o' this, or I'm a liar!"

"Maybe, but I'mbettin' ag'inst it. We'll smoke him out yit!"

"When the stars fall!"

"Make 'em all think your way, pardner, an' I'll loan ye a rumbrill fer to keep the pate o' ye sound while the shower lasts!" grimly chuckled Silver-tip Sid as he noted that growl of sarcastic disgust.

He had comparatively little trouble in keeping his prisoner still after the first few seconds. Those steel-like fingers were rapidly doing their work, and the fall had been a heavy one, in itself almost enough to drive all fight out of the fellow's body.

Slightly loosening his grip on that throat lest death come too soon for his wishes, Silver-tip waited and listened, noting almost as readily as he could with unimpeded sight, the movements of his enemies, as long as they remained within earshot.

It was very clear that they had not heard the cry which the luckless outlaw started to raise, and just as plain that none of them missed their fellow-knave.

After all it was a blind hunt, and they were not much to blame for reasoning that the sharpshooter had long since effected an escape.

"The same good luck go with ye, critters!" laughed Silver-tip Sid as the last sound died away, convincing him that he had no longer aught to dread from that portion of the Imps. "Call ag'in when ye hain't got so long to stay, an' mabe ye'll find the ole man to hum. Ef ye do—waal, it's big dollars to weenty cents that ye'll wish ye didn't hed!"

He slackened his grip on that throat, holding his hands ready to resume their former position at the slightest hint of an outcry, though he knew that this was caution run to waste after the strength he had put forth from the outset.

Only a faint shiver and a wheezy, gasping sigh as the grateful air flowed through the opening tubes.

"Sensible critter, you be, pardner," muttered Rocket as he lifted his weight from the hapless outlaw. "Told ye to take forty winks, an' like a blessed white lamb 'ith a quirly tail, ye go right off to 'beyin' orders like ye'd bin fetched up on 'em all yer life! Pity to give ya any more bother, but business is business, an' I'm its de-pity jest now—wuss luck you, Johnny!"

His nimble fingers found and released the stout leather belt of arms buckled about the Imp's middle, and drawing forth the weapons, he made use of the keen knife thus secured to slit the belt into strips long enough and stout enough for the particular end he had in view.

Though only a rift of moonlight sifted into the recess, it was sufficient, backed by his keen eyes and trained fingers, and in a marvelously brief space of time, Rocket had his captive bound hand and foot, with a neat gag in readiness for application when the proper time should come for making use of it.

Through all this, the Imp had been slowly regaining the use of his lungs, though he seemed very weak from the fall and choking combined; so weak and helpless that it seemed the very refinement of cruelty to even think of applying bonds to his nerveless limbs.

"Satan trust ye fer me, though!" grimly nodded Silver-tip Sid, as something of the kind flitted through his busy brain. "Fast bind, fast find is plenty good 'nough fer this chicken."

"Mercy—don't kill—I never meant—"

"Stiddy by jerks!" hissing warned the veteran, one hand slipping up to rest on that bruised throat, the other tapping those lips with the gag by way of added warning. "Try to yelp out 'bove a whisper, an' I'll bloody murder ye all over an' back ag'in!"

A husky gasp was all. The thoroughly cowed ruffian lay shivering beneath that hand, clearly expecting death to follow.

"I'm jest the rustiest ole p'izen pill ye ever shuck up in a box 'fore takin' as a last-sleeper, critter," grimly growled the spy, his beard tristling until it scratched that flushed face and his little eyes rolling and glowing until they seemed about to drop from their sockets. "An' in all my 'tarnal 'sperience I never yit felt p'izener then I do jest this werry minnit! I'm fightin' myself harder'n a mule kin kick frozen punkins up a side hill—I'm puttin' on cairb an' crooper an' double-cinch—all to hold back my hungry tushes from rippin' ye up inter jerked beef!"

"Don't—I'll be your nigger fer life!"

More by touch than through sight or hearing did Silver-tip Sid realize how completely his captive was unmanned, and as he had no particular desire to scare him to death, he at once dropped his exaggerated savagery, speaking in clear though guarded tones:

"All right, critter, ef ye really mean what ye say."

"I do—only spar' my mis'able life!"

Though still in abject terror, the Imp spoke in more natural tones, and there was something in them that caused Silver-tip Sid to give a perceptible start and crane his neck forward; but the prisoner lay with his head and face in the utter darkness, and it was not until Rocket dragged him closer to the entrance, where the moonlight could fall athwart his person, that that sudden suspicion was solved.

"I reckon you've got a name, critter?" he asked, slowly, reaching over to where lay the black hood which had been torn from the outlaw during the brief struggle preceding his capture. "Ef you didn't hev, don't reckon you'd need fer to kiver up the mug o' ye with this funny rig-a-ma-doodle!"

"They forced me—I couldn't git away on tel—"

"Ontel you could hatch up a pesky sight slicker lie then the one you're slingin' at the head o' me this minnit, Dan Dickman!"

"You know—Good Lawd!" gasped the miserable wretch, falling into a fresh fit of shivering at this proof of his incognito having been penetrated.

"Don't ye cuss, Dan'el," gravely rebuked the veteran, shaking an admonitory finger before that fear-blanching face. "We ain't gwine fishin', but they's other things as cussin' puts a hoodoo onto, 'sides that manner o' fun. An' then, it's powerful onlucky fer a dyin' man to go cussin' through his last minnit or two—deed it jest is, now!"

"I'm not dyin'—you won't butcher me?"

"Waal, you say it, but that don't make the tibing Gospel, Dan'el. An'sence ye do say it, I'm more'n ever sure I kin ketch a glimp' o' the black shadder creepin' over ye—for long's I've knowned ye, Dan'el, I never once ketched ye talkin' straight when you could poss'bly ring in a twister fer luck!"

"If you know me, spare my mis'able life fer ole pard's sake!"

"As you'd a' spared me a bit ago when you fu'st smoked me out!" coldly laughed the veteran, steadily sticking to the text he had in view from the very first. "You wasn't grabbin' a gun. You wasn't on the p'int o' callin' your mates fer to see how neat you'd won the big money offered by the boss fer downin' the critter as wiped out Bruiser. No—you was jest gwine fer to holler an' tell 'em they wasn't no use lookin' longer this way fer a pore devil like my size. Eh?"

"Yes, yes, that was it!" eagerly gasped the frightened rascal, his wits too completely muddled for him to see through that thin disguise. "I wanted to save you. I'd a' fit 'em all—fit 'em to the bitter eend—jest to save your life, pard—dear pard!"

Silver-tip Sid turned his head to spit out his intense disgust, although he had steadily worked to bring about just such a condition, the more surely to gain the ends he had in view.

"An' sech a mis'able critter kin look like a man—on the outside!" he muttered, disgustedly to himself.

"You will—you won't butcher me, dear pard?"

Silver-tip Sid made no immediate reply, but seating himself where the moonlight fell across his lower limbs, he drew forth his knife and stretching his duck overalls tight, began passing the bright blade back and forth as though whetting it for speedy use.

"I ain't so mighty sure but what I'll hev to, Dan'el," he said, in cool, matter-of-fact tones. "Ef you could only speak the truth fer two seconds at a stretch—"

"I kin—I'll tell ye all ye want to know!" pantingly interrupted the road-agent.

"An' heap sight more, 'thout a doubt, Dan'el."

"Cross the heart o' me, pard!"

"What's the name o' your boss, Dan'el?" sharply asked Rocket, suspending the whetting movement as he leaned forward with keen gaze reading that fear-blanching face before him.

"Prince Lucifer, so help me—"

The bared blade sharply tapped his lips, cutting short that impious oath, then Silver-tip Sid added:

"His name, Dan'el, not his night-cap. Ef you lie, salt won't save ye more'n the fortieth part of a second—mind that, will you?"

"I don't know any other name fer him, pard, ef you kill me double times over," was the earnest response. "He never give no name but jest that, nur I don't reckon they's one o' the boys ever seed his face onkivered, to know 'twas his—I never did."

"Yit you're one o' his Imps—fer how long sence, Dan'el?"

"Fer me—not a month, yit; but some o' the boys hev bin gittin' pay fer heap sight longer'n that."

"Jest plain road-agentin', or—what lays back o' that, Dan'el?"

"Big money, the boss says, but jest what I couldn't never smell out cluss 'nough fer to understand the hull thing. I know we was to ketch a man—we did ketch him, this evenin', on Danny O'Toole's run—an' that same man was to be hitched up to a gal in double harness by a gospel sharp or a law sport which the boss hed penned up in—"

"Stiddy, Dan'el!" gravely warned Silver-tip, resuming the operation of whetting his knife.

"Cross my heart, pard!" earnestly declared the prisoner, with a manner which carried conviction with it, despite the marvelous story he thus shadowed forth.

"An' then—ef you ain't lyin', Dan'el? What

was to come when the man was hitched to the gal, double-team?"

"Wish't I could tell ye, but I cain't. All I know is they's a big bonanza hingin' onto that same gittin' merried, but jest what or jest how, fer the life o' me I couldn't find out!"

"Dan'el," softly said Rocket, testing the edge of his knife on his thumb while speaking: "Kin you think up ary sort o' prayer, jest now?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

HALF OF A STRANGE SECRET.

WITH an emotion that was little short of superstitious awe, Mark Bywater stared at that pale shadow of a face not seen for many weary months—a face that he instantly recognized, despite the woeful change wrought by fatigue, grief and fear combined.

At first glance naught but the pale, beautiful countenance could be seen, for that alone afforded sufficient contrast to the dark background, figure and garments blending with the shadows that thickened beyond the full rays cast out by the candles.

"Una—Miss Freestone!" the man faltered, hoarsely, trying to lift a hand to brush across his eyes, forgetting his bonds for the moment in that bewildering vision.

Then—a wild, choking cry answered back, and calling him by name, the poor girl flung out her arms as though to implore his aid.

"Una—is it indeed you?" cried Mark, plunging forward with dangerous force, tripped by his forgotten bonds as he strove to meet that frightened advance.

Prince Lucifer, taken hardly less by surprise by that unlooked-for intrusion, just then, partly broke the force of what might easily have proven a fatal fall, but pinning the agitated sport fast to the cavern floor as he uttered a harsh, peculiar call.

The younger mask also sprung forward, but in that gloved hand a bared blade flashed in the candle-light.

And poor Una, with that wild, inarticulate cry, sunk insensible in the strong arms of her burly captor in whose company she had ridden that night from the camp beside the mountain run.

As a couple of bearded rascals sprung hurriedly forward in obedience to that signal, Prince Lucifer rose up, saying hurriedly:

"Watch him—hold him snug, but treat him as white as you know how, without chinning too free. I'll be back shortly."

He flung up an impatient hand that caused Una's captor to hurry his fair burden past where Mark Bywater lay, half-stunned, on the rock floor, and catching up a candle Prince Lucifer quickly followed after.

Others moved in his wake, and among them both Andrew and Luther Merrydew, their hands bound, their jaws rudely gagged.

So much Mark Bywater managed to note with rallying senses, and though he made no sign, uttered no sound, he began to realize something of the astounding truth. And as his present guards lifted him from that prone position, he offered no resistance, sinking upon the stool righted for his convenience, leaning his heaving breast against the edge of that rude slab table.

Strong man though he prided himself on being, that ghost-like vision had sorely shaken his nerves, and something like a shiver of dread crept through his frame as he noted the return of Prince Lucifer.

If he could have been granted a little longer time in which to gather his wits, to steel his nerves, to prepare for the last, hardest struggle of the night!

"Go see if the horses are all safe," quietly uttered the outlaw leader, as he came back to the table where his prisoner was seated. "I forgot them when that infernal row was kicked up. Go—and never mind about reporting results unless you catch my signal."

In silence the guards accepted their dismissal, leaving the chamber and Mark Bywater to their superior officer.

"You play the ghost-scene fairly well, Mr. Bywater," he coldly said, supporting his arms on the table after the old fashion. "But it's played out, now, and with your permission I'll hark back to that long-lost bonanza of Paul Sander's."

He paused as though expecting reply or question, but neither came. Mark was too deeply shaken, as yet, to volunteer either, and felt only too glad of a fair excuse for maintaining silence while desperately fighting for his briefly-lost nerve and clearness of wits.

"Never mind just where I dropped the thread; you haven't forgotten very many details of that iniquitous will and its little side issues, I'm fairly confident. If you have, just shape your doubts in fair words, and I'll do my level best to brush away the cobwebs."

While speaking thus, Prince Lucifer produced a flat note-book from his bosom, opening it and taking therefrom a folded paper, which he held partly hidden while adding:

"The crazy old millionaire left two curious bits of parchment behind him, both of which related to his secret bonanza. One of these was directed to Una Freestone, the other was to pass into the hands of the young man whom he had

chosen to inherit the other half of his vast fortune: yourself, Mark Bywater! And this is a copy of the clew which fell into your hands," he added, spreading out the folded paper, a copy of which is given on this page.

Despite the restraint he was putting upon himself, Mark Bywater failed to entirely hide the start of amazement which the sight gave him, for this was a perfect copy of the cryptogram which he had given to Silver-tip Sid for safe-keeping until the right moment came for thoroughly testing the theory he had formed concerning its real value.

For a single breath he feared that it was more than a copy; that his trusted friend had proven treacherous or else fallen into those merciless hands; but then he knew better. The original cryptogram was pen-printed on heavy parchment, or semi-transparent skin, similar to that used in covering snare-drums and banjos. This was transferred to plain white paper, even to the scattered holes burnt in one half of its surface.

Prince Lucifer forced a short, harsh laugh as he strove to read what lay back of that white, stony mask.

"You're wondering how I caught this treasure, Mark Bywater? You are wondering why I didn't freeze on to the original, instead? Well, some day you may know, but just for the present, play we go on.

"You're no fool, young fellow. You know that in this bit of labyrinth lies hidden a fortune big enough for a score greedy hands. And knowing so much, you have spent many a long hour trying to learn more.

"I believe you have made that discovery! I believe that you have come to this wild region expressly to test the truth of the clew you finally plucked from this cursed puzzle! And now—if you value life, you'll share that same secret with me this very night!"

By this time High-water Mark was nearly his usual self again; his brain clear, his nerve steady, his wits keen and audacious.

"Half a secret can serve you mighty little better than not a smell, Oran Solander. That is your real name, by the way?"

"Yes or no, what matters it to you?" with a vicious snarl through that black cowl.

"Not an iota," with a light laugh and open yawn. "Only—I like to follow suit when in good company, and as you're so fond of slinging questions at a poor devil's head, I simply returned the one that first came to hand. Don't answer if it hurts your teeth; a rascal by any other name smells just as loudly."

"I began to hope that you were growing half-way sensible, young man," harshly said Prince Lucifer, passing that skit without notice. "There's a limit to all things, and if you once fairly cross the dead-line—well, salt won't begin to save you! Now listen:

"Give up this secret clew, and the hour it is proven of real value to me, that very hour shall witness your perfect freedom—that very hour shall see you turned loose, to go your own way, never again to be molested by me or mine!"

"A monstrous benefit, for which I hardly know how to thank you sufficiently!" murmured Mark, his face like that of one fairly dazed.

"And yet—supposing I felt obliged to decline?"

"Then I go back to my original scheme," was the swift response. "I'll marry you to that beautiful ghost of yours!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW MARK WAS TEMPTED OF LUCIFER.

With eyes that actually seemed on fire, Prince Lucifer leaned across the rude table trying to discount the effects of that swift sentence—the card on which he had long counted as a certain winner in the big game he was playing so desperately.

But he had made the common mistake of waiting too long before disclosing the real strength of his hand, and bitter disappointment was his main reward.

Not even his burning gaze could note the slightest change in that coldly-composed countenance. Not a quiver—not a muscle altered—naught that could betray the sea of emotions which found a battle-ground in that brave heart.

"Are you waiting for thanks, Oran Solander?" coldly spoke the young man, his fine brows slightly arching, his red lips curling with a faint smile that seemed a cross between scorn and amusement.

"Say rather for a decision that means all the difference between a long and deliciously happy life with one whom you madly adore, and a prolonged death of torture such as will cast the most malignant red savage and his torments into the shade!" harshly cried Prince Lucifer, tapping that curious enigma in black and white with a gloved finger as it lay spread between the twain.

"You surely forgot the prior wife and luckless kids, captain!" his prisoner said, in mock reproach. "Spare them, even if you have no mercy on my poor self!"

"Still thinking to save yourself by playing the silly buffoon?" frowned his adversary, plainly fighting hard to retain his coolness.

lest in an outburst of rage he should make a bad matter still worse. "Will you never realize that this is more than an idle jest?"

"Show me cause for falling into your peculiar humor, Oran Solander, and then we'll get down to business in prime shape."

"What do you call cause?" hesitated Prince Lucifer.

"To begin with, where and when did you steal this copy?"

"More than a year ago, when you were thoroughly disgusted with life and all its prospects," laughing maliciously as his keen eyes noted the faint flush which crept over that handsome face before him. "When you felt, like the little girl of history, that this world was hollow and your doll stuffed with sawdust! Shall I elaborate?"

"Then you were playing for the Solander bonanza so far back?" ignoring the half-sneering question.

"Ever since that crazed rascal tried to carry his insane hatred beyond the very grave," cried Prince Lucifer, lifting the black cowl from his head and dropping it into his lap.

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at least two souls perfectly happy before shuffling off this mortal coil."

"Perhaps you're telling the truth, but I doubt it," bluntly said High-water Mark.

"And you're mighty right, too," laughed the rascal, seeming to enjoy the thought, but quickly resuming: "Of course I expect to make a good stake out of the game, but what of that? Are you the one to kick, when I'm not only ready, but anxious to give you by far the most precious part of the old fool's little game?"

"And all for what? Nothing more than a share of your secret—for I happen to know that you have already solved this devilishly intricate cryptogram!" striking the paper indicated a vicious blow with his clinched fist.

"You are wrong, but of course you'll not believe me when I say so," coldly uttered High-water Mark.

"You lie!" flashed Prince Lucifer, showing his teeth after an ugly fashion. "You came out here expressly to unearth that buried treasure left by Paul Solander."

"Did he really leave any, other than on paper?" sneered Bywater. "Can you swear that this pretended bonanza is anything more than a phantom of gold? If so, you're heap more confident than I am!"

"Then you still refuse to tell me the key to this paper?"

"I am ignorant of it myself," was the calm reply. "If you were half white or quarter decent, I'd offer to make solemn oath to that effect."

Prince Lucifer, despite his expressed skepticism, ground a savage oath between his teeth. No mean judge of human nature, he was forced to believe what this man said to him now.

That being true, only one card remained for him to play, where he had up to that point felt sure of at least two, each one powerful enough to win against any ordinary man.

"Let that point drop, then. All that remains is to say this much, simply premising that I'm making you a final offer, for the last time.

"Swear that you'll grant me one request when the secret does come to light, and I'll leave you a fair bride, life, liberty and wealth! Only a fool could ask for better terms!"

"Unless said fool preferred to pick a bride to suit his own taste, my hasty friend," slowly said Mark, showing no outward trace of emotion, though his blood was leaping wildly through his veins, and his heart was throbbing so fiercely that he could hear it beat.

"Hymen's noosa, or hangman's loop!" frowned Prince Lucifer.

"Hanging is shorter punishment, and I've heard say that it is an easy method of crossing the range," retorted High-water Mark, with a short, careless laugh.

"For a strong man, maybe; but for a dainty girl?"

"What do you mean by that?" cried Mark, changing color.

"That you shall marry Una Freestone, by mutual consent, or you shall hang her until she dies, with your own hands!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PRINCE LUCIFER AND HIS IMPS IN COUNCIL.

Their eyes met steadily for a single breath, then Mark Bywater broke into a laugh, bitter and scornful, yet not entirely concealing the sickening dread which assailed his heart.

Wildly preposterous though that threat sounded, impossible as it seemed on the surface, there was something in that face and those redly glowing eyes that told the young man Prince Lucifer fully intended to make his threats good.

"Are you mad, Oran Solander? Do you take me for a cur of your own caliber?" he ejaculated in tones of angry scorn.

"Don't you jump at conclusions too mighty quick, my dear fellow," grimly chuckled the outlaw chief, adding in slow, distinct tones: "As I said, hold out longer, and you shall hang Una Freestone and watch her ghastly death-contortions without lifting a hand to cut them short or to save the life of the woman you once professed to love!"

"Does that sound so mighty incredible? Can't you draw a mental picture of a greased pulley fastened high overhead; of ropes passing through—one rope, for that matter, with a noose at each end, cut to measure! Two figures standing on an elevation each, with a noose snugly fitted about each neck. Then—a push that sends the larger and heavier from said perch! A jerk that runs the lighter weight up to die the death set apart for felons of the blackest dye!"

"You devil—you merciless demon!" panted High-water Mark, great beads of cold sweat starting out on his brow, his athletic form quivering with mad, impotent rage and soul-sickening horror.

Prince Lucifer rose to his feet, kicking back the stool he had occupied, leaning both hands on the slab table, gazing steadily into that convulsed face as he sternly added:

"I've talked plainly to you, Mark Bywater. I've given you a fair chance to make an election. And simply adding that every word just

uttered is gospel truth, I'll leave you alone with your thoughts as sole company for a few minutes.

"Weigh the matter carefully, for when I come back for your decision, the one you offer will be accepted without an instant's hesitation. The time for arguing is past. From this time on—action, pure and simple!"

Without pausing for a reply, Prince Lucifer turned away from the table and strode through the gloom to the inner chamber where fresh lights were burning and a little company was waiting his return, with greater or less impatience on face or tongue.

Seated at a rude table, patterned after the one already alluded to so frequently, were two men with bottle and glasses between them, apparently bent on seeing which could secure the major portion of the liquid poison. But as Prince Lucifer entered that chamber, each glass—more properly cups, taken from the bottoms of pocket-flasks—were dropped unheeded in their eagerness to learn the whole truth.

"Say, you're getting there, governor!" ejaculated the younger of the twain, while his elder fully as greeably cried:

"How goes it? What luck?"

"Mighty stubborn, but he's got to bend or break, and I reckon I've convinced him of so much, after hard talking," responded Prince Lucifer, as he drew near the table, picking up and filling one of the abandoned cups, tossing off the strong liquor as though it were but water.

His present companions were Andrew Merrydew, and the young man whom we have until now known as Luther, his son.

Neither man was bound, and the younger, Calvin Solander, to give him his rightful name, showed no signs of that seeming death-shot sent at his brain by the burly ruffian who had "surprised" their night camp beside the purling brook.

All disguise had been cast aside for the present, and the triad met in council with no secrets between them, unless an exception be made in favor of the youngest.

Andrew Merrydew laughed until his flabby cheeks puffed out and eclipsed his little eyes; laughed with an oily, gurgling sound that reminded one of a barrel emptying itself at a partly-clogged bung-hole; laughed until Calvin Solander scowled black as night and sharply cast a half-cup of whisky into his face.

"Come to, old porpoise!" he laughed, as the lawyer caught his breath with a choking gasp, then falling to sneezing with a force that threatened to shake his head off. "You'll chuckle yourself into the grave, one of these lonesome days, and then what'll become of us poor devils? The poor-house or the stone jug for life!"

Merrydew rallied, and feeling far too jubilant for holding a grudge, he spluttered rapidly, as a fat hand dove into his bosom:

"We haven't been entirely idle, you want to know, my friend! We've brought our share to the general contribution-box, and—What d'ye think of that, eh?"

He dropped the stiff piece of parchment containing one of the twin cryptograms, on the table before Prince Lucifer, leaning back and chuckling away at an amazing rate as he watched the eager interest with which the prime villain scanned that prize.

"You found it—at last!"

"Didn't I say I would? Didn't I tell you I'd—ahem!—get there with both feet?"

There was no answer, no comment. Prince Lucifer was bent over that puzzling bit of per-work, trying to clear away the mists which had hung over it so long—trying to match and blend it with the stolen copy which he had shown to Mark Bywater a short time before.

"And you—you have the mate, all safe?" Andrew Merrydew ventured to ask, after his fit of merry triumph had had time to exhaust itself.

"Why not?" growled the prime schemer, giving a start and a black frown as his redly glowing eyes lifted to that fat face. "I'm living, ain't I? Well—death alone could make me lose my grip on this bit of paper!" he added, with a low, ugly laugh, as he produced the copy, placing it side by side with the one drawn on parchment.

Andrew Merrydew swallowed those hot words without even the shadow of hesitation or resentment. He was fully as greedy as the speaker, and with that long-coveted prize in sight, he would have endured blows just as dumbly.

Their heads came together as both bowed to inspect the prize more closely, but neither uttered a sound. Andrew Merrydew simply shifted his position to the other side of the table, so that he could scan the strange cryptogram without having the characters standing on their heads.

Calvin Solander hardly gave the papers a second glance, leaning back, his face pale, his lips curling with bitter scorn.

"They're plainly meant to supplement each other!" mumbled the fat old lawyer, licking his flabby lips longingly as he feasted his hungry eyes. "But—how? What have you ciphered out, Oran?"

"Nothing—as yet," was the reluctant reply.

"But we'll get there—in good time."

"Then that hot-head has held out, against all threats!"

"High-water Mark?" asked Prince Lucifer, lifting his head, a sneer flashing across his hard features. "That shows how little you know of the villain! Satan himself couldn't move him the thousandth part of an inch, by pure threats!"

"But—did you ring in the little woman? That ought to shake his nerve, unless it's made of pure steel."

"That's the only chance, and a precious ticklish one at that," with a moody scowl. "I've left him for a bit to weigh the question for himself, but it's even odds that he'll throw even such a chance over his shoulder and bid us do our level worst!"

"Hardly, when we bring the pair face to face?" half-asserted, half-questioned Merrydew, seeming to feel the same fierce interest in the case that marked Prince Lucifer himself. "He'd be more or less than human if he could keep his backbone stiff through such an interview."

Prince Lucifer made no immediate reply, once more bending his red eyes upon those puzzling enigmas before him. If he could only catch the right clew! If he only knew where to begin that unraveling.

"It's there, and those holes have something important to do with untangling the knots!" asserted Merrydew, a stumpy forefinger calling attention to those black-edged perforations.

"And even if the young idiots do turn stubborn and refuse to squeal—what matter? Haven't we got fast hold of the bonanza as long as we keep these papers? Even without his or their aid, we can strike the right scent and unearth the golden treasure!"

"Golden phantom!" harshly laughed Calvin Solander. "Fools all!"

"What do you mean by that, boy?" sternly ejaculated Prince Lucifer, turning his scowling face upon the young man.

"What do I mean?" echoed the other, adding, swiftly: "That if ever the bonanza was buried where those papers say, the devil has long since unearthed it! That Paul Solander is still alive and kicking!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

NOW SILVER-TIP CHANGED HIS COLORS.

As Silver-tip Sid asked that grave question, he leaned forward until his bristling beard almost touched the ghastly-pale face of his captive, who quaveringly gasped:

"A prayer—you don't mean to—Mercy, pard!" with piteous agony in husky voice and sweat-bedewed face. "I'll tell ye all—I ain't lyin' to ye now—I ain't fit fer to die!"

"No more ye ain't, Dan'el," gravely assented Silver-tip, drawing back a little, but still testing the edge of his blade on the ball of his thumb. "Not fitten fer death, an' mighty sight less fitten fer to keep on wastin' the atmospheric."

"What hev I done that—Don't, pard!"

"It's heap sight easier an' shorter fer to tell what he hain't done—in the line o' pizen cussedness an' 'tarnal evil, Dan'el, to my notion," gravely nodded the veteran, resuming the whetting of his knife, as though hardly satisfied with its keenness. "Leavin' out lies, which I sorter reckon was born'd into ye, an' so part o' your natur', so to speak. Leavin' them out, I do reckon they ain't any wickedness short o' roastin' an' eatin' your own kids which your record is clear of.

"But I ain't settin' up as your jedgo an' jury, Dan'el. If they wasn't anythin' else in the way, you mought go foot-free an' throat-open on tel' you ketched up 'ith the hangman, fer all o' me. But—"

"Let me go! Don't butcher me like a hog!" moaned the miserable wretch, worse frightened by that cold, even manner of speech than he could have been by fiercest bluster.

"Ye see, Dan'el, the idee is like this," tapping an open palm with the bared blade by way of lending emphasis to his words. "Sarcumstances which I hain't got no bulge onto is 'bout crowdin' me 'long a trail o' darkness so mighty black ye hev to hew a path through by chunks in a lump! An' that trail hes ten thousand deaths piled up fer every inch o' the lone-some way! An' ef I happen to run foul o' jest one—jest a single weenty one o' the hull pot-an'b'ilin' o' the bunch, mind ye, Dan'el—why, I lose my ticket an' flop clean over the rang!"

"An' so, ye see, Dan'el, in clean marcy to your mis'able self, I've jest got to wipe you out afore I set to goin'—jest got to!"

Though Silver-tip seemed fully convinced by this rather misty argument, not so his wretched prisoner. Amid groans and moans and sobs of abject terror, the poor rascal begged for his life.

"I've done told ye all I know! I've done swore—"

"But you hain't struck the right p'int, even yet, Dan'el," patiently persisted the veteran. "The idee is jest like this: Ef I was to let ye go, free-foot, you'd be dead sure to set the

bloodhoun's onto my track inside o' ten seconds by the watch!"

"I'll not—I'll take any sort o' oath never to breathe a word o' all that's happened this night!" vigorously declared Dickman.

"Which is jest why I know ye would," grimly laughed Silver-tip. "You lie by natur', Dan'el, an' that is a dead give-away. But as I was tellin' ye—the idee is like this:

"Ef I was to leave ye here, bound an' jaw-stoppered, which I've got to do ef I don't wipe ye clean out at a rub, you'd be heap sight wuss off then dead, ef I should happen to run up ag'in my mortal sickness 'long o' travelin' that trail o' danger which I 'luded to a bit ago. Fer nobody'd ever think o' lookin' fer sech a mighty treasure up in this hole o' rocks. An' ef nobody come, you'd hev to go—up the flume o' never-come-back-ag'in! Don't ye see?"

"I'd rather—Give me a show, pard!" eagerly panted the outlaw.

"Knowin' what I bin tellin' ye?"

"Anythin'—jest so you let me live on as long's I kin!"

"All right, Dan'el," with a cheerful resignation, putting up his knife and setting the outlaw partly free, so that he could strip him of his outer garments without giving him too great encouragement to attempt an escape by turning the tables on himself. "Mebbe you're in the right. Mebbe you'll pull through with wind into the hide o' ye. An' to keep up your pluck a bit, I'll say this much: ef I don't ketch my last sickness over yan', I'll come back this way in a week or so, jest to see ef you're past savin' or not."

Almost before the road-agent could divine his purpose, Silver-tip Sid had stripped him of such garments as he cared for just then, and replaced his bonds as before.

"What be ye gwine to do, pard?" he called out, curiosity for the moment overpowering the bodily fear which still held him a slave. "You won't shift yer mind an'—You won't hurt a pore devil, will ye?"

"I'm gwine to preform a merrykle, Dan'el," nodded Silver-tip Sid, with a short laugh as he finished knotting those thongs and again flashed forth that whetted blade, the sight of which sent Dan Dickman shrinking back as far as his situation would allow. "I'm gwine fer to show ye how to turn a honest white man into a dirty nigger o' sin."

Catching hold of his luxuriant beard, Rocket applied the keen blade without a moment's hesitation, though it must have cost him an internal pang to thus rob himself of his chief if not sole claim to distinction in outward appearance.

The peculiarly marked hair fell in little tufts, the steady hand and sharp blade moving here and there until his face showed but a short, bristling crop of stubble, similar to that which marked the wondering prisoner who lay watching his motions.

Doffing his hat, Silver-tip Sid treated his white-ended locks after the same remorseless fashion, sawing them off until he was shorn of all his glory. And something like a sigh of regret rose in his throat as he rubbed his head and face with dubious palm.

"Ef I look as p'izen mean as I feel, Dan'el, you'd ort to be bowin' to your twin brother! Good Lawd! ef my ole granny was to step out o' the grave an' come ithin' grip o' my claws this minnit, reckon I'd choke her to death jest fer to rob her o' the one broken tooth she had left in her jaws the day o' her death! An'—Hev to button up my pockets, or billy-be-durned ef I don't ketch me robbin' my own self!"

Silver-tip Sid heaved a doleful sigh that flatly belied his attempted jocosity, then put up his knife and turned to the garments which he had stripped from his prisoner.

"Hope I won't ketch nothin' wuss then the seven-year eetch, puttin' 'em on, Dan'el!" he muttered, shaking the clothes with vicious suspicion. "Hev to tie 'em double-fast, or they'll be crawlin' all off o' me, jest when I don't want it that way the most kind! Fleas—an' gray-backs—an'—Dan'el?"

"Yes, pard!"

"Never went in swimmin' sence ye was a weenty kid, did ye?"

"Waal, I don't—"

"Thought so!" with a sniff as his nose turned up sharply. "Pity I hed to meet up ith sech a pole-catty critter, but I don't reckon they's any use fer to howl an' keep on kickin'. So—Dan'el?"

"Yes, sir, your Honor," stammered the prisoner, shivering in mortal fear before that strangely-acting and bluntly speaking captor.

There was no immediate reply made by the veteran, who rose from his squatting position, bending his head in keen listening for a few seconds, then crouching low down and gliding silently out from the rocky niche in which he had sought refuge.

Blending his form with a dark boulder, Silver-tip Sid cast slow, searching looks around him, at the same time making the best possible use of his ears.

"Reckon I was fooled," he muttered, barely above his breath, as he cautiously advanced, sweeping the br'ken ground with his cat-like eyes for some signs of his enemies. "Thought

some p'izen critter was snoopin' 'round the shanty, fer to—Reckon I was fooled!"

He paused, half turning back in the direction of the spot where he had left his captive so abruptly, but then he kept on until at a point from whence he could peer across to the still fire-lighted ledge back of which he knew lay the cavern utilized by Prince Lucifer and his Imps as a retreat, either as a rule or temporarily.

He saw several cowled figures on the ledge, both near the head of the winding trail, and closer to the fires, and while noting these, he saw still others climbing up the steep.

"Giv' it over, hev ye?" he muttered, with a grim chuckle as he divined the truth. "Tired o' huntin' a spook, eh? Waal," with grim emphasis as he turned back toward the place where Dan Dickman was shivering in fear, "ef you only knowed it, you're heap luckier then ef you'd run up against the Silver-tip—yes you be, now!"

Without seeing or hearing aught to prove that any of the road-agents were still searching for him in that vicinity, Sidney Rocket made the best of his way back to the rock covert, smiling faintly as he heard Dan Dickman heave a sigh of mingled regret and fear at his coming.

"Wuss then a counterfeit copper, ain't I, Dan'el? Waal, what can't be mended must be putt up with, ye want to know. An', Dan'el, I don't reckon ye need skeer 'bout any other body comin' in on ye 'thout stoppin' to rap or ring the front door-bell."

"I don't—"

"That's what I said, Dan'el. The boys is all wored out huntin' a silver-tip so pesky brash, an' they've moseyed back hum. An' I raally reckon it's comin' high time fer Dan Dickman to foller suit!"

Sidney Rocket untied the 'kerchief which he wore about his neck under the loose collar of his flannel shirt, and folding this up to form a bandage, he deftly knotted it about his head in such a manner that, while leaving him free use of his eyesight, it would hide nearly all the face left clear of hair.

"I don't reckon you knowed it yit, Dan'el," he said, while thus engaged, "but you're a raal hero—one o' the soap-chawin', rip-roarin' an' kick over the traces fellers ye read about! An' you was one o' the werry fu'st to ketch a blue pill, when they come in sech a bee-buzz after Bruiser turned up his toes. Hit ye right on the cabeza, an' made a hole big a-plenty fer to putt any common critter to sleep fer all eeternity; but not you, Dan el!"

"The idee is like this: you was so durned mad at the owdacious critter's darin' fer to chip in 'thout axin' will ye let me or no, that you never even knowed you was kilt. An' you was one o' the leaders in the bolt down fer to wipe out them insults. An' you went rip-roarin' all over the mount'ins in s'arch, an' it wasn't none o' your fault that you never ketched the durn warmint."

"You see, Dan'el, you was too monstrous brave fer to holler out when my pill hit ye, an' you hed too much grit fer to quit 'long's they was even the ghost of a show fer to ketch the devil—meanin' me, ye know, Dan'el! But when that show played out—waal, you begin fer to grow kinder white round the gills, an' would the boss excuse ye ef ye was to hint that you'd sorter like to hev him show ye the right road fer to git to the horsepitla?"

"What! you're not—they'll butcher ye like a dog!" gasped Dan Dickman, as he at length began to divine what that growing masquerade really foreshadowed.

"I reckon they will ef I cain't 'pose on 'em as the ginewine Dan'l," coolly nodded Rocket, picking up that sable cowl and drawing it over his head to complete his disguise. "An' while croakin' I'll hev the grim satisfaction o' knowin' that I won't be more'n a week or two earlier on the trail than my pard Dan. Fer ef I can't come back to set you loose, Dan'el, be sure they won't anybody else take the trouble."

The miserable wretch tremblingly begged to be granted his liberty, vowing all manner of things, but Silver-tip Sid cut him short with:

"They's jest one show: my pullin' through safe an' comin' back to ye my own sweet self, Dan'el. An' so—to help my chances loom up bigger, tell me the passwords you critters use—an' all sich!"

As well as he could for fear and trembling, Dan Dickman declared that none such were in use: that as long as one black hood saw another near, that was recognition sufficient.

"Waal, you're sech a born'd liar, Dan'l, that a body cain't putt any 'pendence in what ye say; but I'm gwine fer to resk it. I'm gwine to change colors an' play road-agent fer a while!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW THE MATRIMONIAL FEVER SPREAD.

PRINCE LUCIFER stared at the speaker, his strong face the field of contradictory emotions, his hands clinched together and resting upon the twin cryptograms.

Only for this, shutting off his hungry eyes as they did, Andrew Merrydew would hardly have noticed that outburst. As it was, he looked up with an ugly sneer wrinkling his fat face.

"What do you mean, Cal?" sternly demanded Prince Lucifer.

"Precisely what I say: that instead of filling a grave, Paul Solander is as much alive as he ever was, and a mighty sight more wild and woolly, too!"

"You're mad, boy!" flashed the road-agent chief, angrily, though his florid face turned several shades whiter as he saw how resolute the younger villain seemed.

"Madder than that wild beast of the mountains—just so," supplemented Andrew Merrydew, seeing that an explanation must be given before either would be content to go on with that examination of the treasure-clews.

In as brief terms as possible the old lawyer explained what had happened at their night-camp, so far as the abrupt appearance of the seemingly crazed man was concerned, with his carrying off Una Freestone, her recovery by young Solander, etc.

"And as a cap-sheaf, Luther—I should say Calvin—has picked up the preposterous notion that he is none other than dead-and-buried Paul Solander!"

Merrydew spoke in tones of strong derision, not unmixed with contempt, but Calvin Solander remained dogged, his father showed signs of deep annoyance, if not actual consternation, though this expression was but short-lived.

"Now you've got it, old man," the younger one curtly said. "Let that old fool scoff as he will, I'm right, for rocks!"

"You're wrong, boy," with a dark frown. "He's dead and turned to dust long ago!"

"Didn't we pay for his death? Didn't we see him buried?" puffed Merrydew, only to be caught up swiftly with:

"You lie, Merrydew, and you know it! You saw what they told you was his grave, but that was all. You never saw his body. You did not know of his death—real or pretended—until more than a month after that grave was closed. Then how can you swear what lay hidden beneath the mound? How can you say that anything was there—save a cunning fraud to cover a criminal neglect?"

Merrydew replied only by a wildly exaggerated yawn, but Prince Lucifer treated the matter in a more business-like manner:

"You mean that Griswold permitted his patient to escape, then concocted that bold lie to cover his fault?"

Calvin Solander nodded a vigorous assent: that was precisely what he did mean, and he might have said as much in plain speech, only for turning his eyes to see whose feet made that faint echo just then.

It was the youth who had so vigorously defended Mark Bywater when the Imps were about to avenge the supposed death of their leader. But though the garments were the same, the black cowl had been discarded, and the seeming man stood confessed a woman.

More than ordinarily charming, too, in face as in figure; her great black eyes sparkling with animation, her smooth cheeks softly flushed, her full lips red and arched like Cupid's bow, her jetty curls clustering about her really beautiful *bruné* face—the face which had the day before so awakened the curiosity of Mark Bywater—the face of "Miss Mary Jones!"

She dropped a white hand on the shoulder of the younger member of the triad, and Calvin Solander slipped an arm about her lithe waist, leaning one cheek back against her swelling bosom as he met that half-angry, half-scornful frown with which Prince Lucifer rewarded his last assertion.

"Merrydew is right; you are a fool, boy!" nodded the chief.

"Your word is Gospel, of course, dad," with an undisguised sneer curling his lips. "You wouldn't tell a lie for all the world, with the heavens thrown in as make-weight, but there is such a thing as falling into an error, through placing too much confidence in the word of another man. And—if I am right—if the old knave should have given his keepers the slip—would Griswold have admitted as much?"

Prince Lucifer gave a visible start, his face turning a shade paler at that cold query. Calvin Solander smiled as he saw how surely his shaft had sped home, but quietly added:

"Merrydew to the contrary, I firmly believe that that wild-beast looking and acting rascal was none other than the original Simons. I believe that Paul Solander contrived in some manner to break away from the asylum where you contrived to land him, and to cover that slip, old Griswold told you a fairy story about his sickness and sudden death."

The strong face of Prince Lucifer changed more than once during this cold, clear statement, but at the end he tossed back his head, once more the grimly confident schemer.

"I can't think it, but even so—what matter? There's far too much at stake to fool away more time on side-issues. And even if that wild fellow is Paul Solander, he's out of the game for good and all."

"It's well you think so," grimly laughed the young man.

"You own that he's really crazy, now, supposing you're right in your wild notion?"

"Beyond a doubt, from what Una said."

"Then he'll never bother us further. And even if mad, and we were to prove him so, what use? We couldn't break that will, thanks to the infernally cunning means he used to prove his complete sanity at the time of making and signing the will."

"Granted, but can you swear that he hasn't long since removed his buried treasure? That you aren't actually chasing a golden phantom?"

Prince Lucifer turned ghastly white at this cold speech, but Andrew Merrydew harshly chipped in:

"Don't mind him, friend Solander. Can't you smell the rat? He's clean lost his wits over that silly doll's-face! He's working the wires in hopes of marrying the girl himself!"

"As I will, curse you!" flashed the young man, and only kept from leaping at the throat of the lawyer by the ready hand and strong arm of the head schemer.

"Simmer, Cal!" frowned the chief, forcing his son to resume his vacated seat. "And you, Merrydew, button up your lip unless you can train your tongue to use less vinegar."

"He don't deny it, even!" mumbled the old lawyer, malignantly.

"Why need he? He will marry Una, when the right time comes."

"Yes, but he wants first whack at the prize, and that has got to go to Mark Bywater!" persisted Merrydew.

Calvin Solander opened his lips to retort, but Prince Lucifer laid a swift palm across them, enforcing silence by his dark frown. Then, like one who was bound to carry his own plans to the end, regardless of all whom they might affect, he said:

"It's too late in the day to even think of changing the line laid out for all hands to follow. So far we've taken every trick played for, and it's got to run that way to the glorious end."

"We've got both man and girl in our hands, out here where law is subordinate to might. We've got both cryptograms, but if we can bring off this marriage in good shape—as we must!—they don't count for aught until a later stage of the game."

"With Mark married to Una, by one fully authorized to perform such a ceremony when the full consent of each contracting party is gained, the rest ought to be easy enough."

Up to this juncture Ruby Solander, to give the young woman in masculine garments her proper name for the first time, had remained a silent if deeply interested witness, her brilliant black eyes roving in turn from face to face, her red-ripe lips twitching a bit at times, but without interposing word or gesture.

"You speak as though confident that those free consents would be gained without further trouble, father," she said, in her rich, deep, musical notes.

"Because I have no further doubt on that point, once the young fools are fairly brought together," was the prompt response.

"Has Mark Bywater given his consent, then?" persisted Ruby.

"Not in so many words, but when it comes to yielding on his side, or torments on hers, he'll give way quickly enough!"

"And of course fool Una will jump at the chance of marrying him!" sneeringly laughed Ruby, her eyes glittering even more vividly as she added the words: "But there's still another obstacle in the road, father, which you'll find it mighty hard to remove."

"What do you mean, girl?"

"That I've made up my mind to marry Mark Bywater myself!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NOW PRINCE LUCIFER PLAYED DAN CUPID.

For a brief space Prince Lucifer stared in amaze at the flushed face of his really beautiful daughter, who faced him defiantly, while Calvin Solander gave her lithe waist a reassuring pressure, taking new hopes to himself at this wholly unlockt-for stand; for if Ruby married Mark Bywater, Mark Bywater surely could not marry Una Freestone!

Prince Lucifer pushed back his stool, leaning both hands on the table between them as he gazed with red eyes and contracted brows at his unexpectedly contrary offspring.

"Look you, kids," he said, his voice even, cold, held under strong restraint that only went to prove how intensely was he set on carrying his point. "I'm doing all this ugly work simply and solely for your united benefit. For myself, I'd never lift a finger to touch that miserly devil's fortune, though it counted up tenfold what we imagine it may. All for you, bear in mind!"

"And they're ready to throw it all to the dogs, just because of a lovesick fancy!" gasped Andrew Merrydew, his fat and florid face the very personification of utter disgust.

"We can find the bonanza—if aught of it remains—through spelling out those puzzles," growled Calvin Solander, with a glance toward the documents lying on the table.

"I'm doing all this for my children," steadily persisted Prince Lucifer, then with his tones suddenly growing hard, even fierce: "But if

those children try to seriously cross me now, woe be unto them! I'll brush them aside—I'll crush them under my feet as I would two venomous serpents!"

Calvin Solander turned paler. Ruby shrank back with a short and painful breath. Despite their own strong passions, both son and daughter were cowed and frightened by that savage outburst.

Prince Lucifer saw this, and he resumed his former cold, even notes, speaking rapidly and to the point:

"Enough of this. You each have tried to play the fool, but I'll have none of it. For your sakes I took up this game, and still for your sakes I'll play card by card until the game is fairly won. You know the plans I have formed. I'll carry them through to the bitter end, let cost what it may!"

He paused for a brief space, his redly-glowing eyes inspecting first one face, then the other, as though he was willing to hear what was to be said on their part. But no such attempt was made. For the time being both son and daughter were cowed, and if not altogether abandoned, their matrimonial hopes were held in subjection until a more favorable opportunity for nourishing them presented itself.

"Call it settled, then," with a grim nod. "Get ready to play the part assigned you, all. I'm going after a couple of stout fellows to do the work and make the thing look more natural. Mind—no more trying to kick over the traces, kids, unless you are anxious to feel the lash, as well as hear it crack!"

Turning away, Prince Lucifer left that chamber, passing through the one where Mark Bywater was still pondering the difficult problem offered him for solution, and gaining the ledge, where his signal quickly brought half a dozen cowed figures to his side.

"That devil who killed Bruiser hasn't been found, then?"

"Not a hide nur ha'r, boss," was the reluctant reply.

For a moment the chief seemed on the point of breaking into a fierce storm of curses, but with an evident struggle he conquered himself. Time enough to find out the ones most in fault, after more important matters were settled.

Bidding the men follow him, he again entered the cavern. With a few hasty whispers, he left three ruffians to deal with Mark Bywater, leading the rest into the second chamber by a side passage.

"Bind and gag these two persons, lads," he curtly directed, indicating Andrew Merrydew and Calvin Solander. "Of course they're my friends, but play they were regular desperadoes who have been doomed to suffer death for their transgressions."

As for Ruby Solander, she had once more resumed her sable cowl, and stood as brave an outlaw as the worst of the lot!

"Keep it up, girl, and you'll come off so much the richer in the end," muttered Prince Lucifer, his voice strangely soft and loving as his hand gently touched her shoulder.

A sullen shrug was his only reward, but he made no further remark, leaving the chamber by a narrow passage at the rear, following which for a few yards brought him to still a third enlargement.

This, like the others, was dimly illuminated by means of candles stuck to projecting points, and on a rude pallet directly beneath one of the lights, a feminine shape was reclining: to swiftly spring to her feet as she caught sight of that dark and hooded shape.

"Don't break your neck, Miss Freestone," Prince Lucifer grimly said, lifting a gloved hand. "I'm not going to eat you up. I'm even going to set you at liberty—provided you permit me to do so after my own fashion."

"Who are you?" faltered Una, shrinking back as far as the cold, rough wall would permit, her feet being at liberty, though her hands were bound behind her back.

"Your best friend, if you'll only try to look at the matter in a reasonable light, Miss Freestone. I have caused you to be brought here to-night—"

The poor girl shrank shivering away, crying:

"Then I owe all this to you? What have I done—"

"It isn't what you have done, nearly so much as what you're going to do," laughed Prince Lucifer, in nowise moved by the poor girl's affright. "All I ask is that you listen calmly to what I have to offer, and then decide which course you will follow."

"Not the slightest harm shall befall you so long as you prove a sensible woman, and act after a reasonable fashion. And if you will do this, instead of looking back with shuddering and horror to this night, you'll live to declare it the brightest, happiest one of all your life—past or yet to come!"

"I am only a poor, weak, helpless girl, sir," Una murmured, her voice barely articulate so greatly was she frightened. "Show me mercy, as you yourself may need mercy hereafter!"

"Come—brace up!" frowned the outlaw chief, growing impatient at losing time for naught.

"One would fancy I meant to murder you or do

something in the raw-head-and-bloody-bones fashion, instead of generously giving you to a handsome, high-toned gentleman as his dearly-beloved wife!"

"Never! I'll die first!" panted Una, her beautiful face flushing, her perfect figure drawing erect, all signs of physical weakness vanishing as by magic.

Prince Lucifer laughed, coldly, harshly, and there was an ugly significance underlying his tones as he spoke again:

"There are still worse things than death, Miss Freestone. But it isn't so much of a question of your hopping the twig as it is of the death of others. Unless—But suppose we illustrate a bit, for a change? Will you permit me, lady?"

With jeering politeness he bowed as he quickly caught an arm and slipped a gloved hand under it, drawing the panting maiden close to his side as he turned toward the chamber where he had left his fellow-plotters a short time before.

His keen ears had caught a guarded signal from the cowed lips of Ruby Solander, from near the division between the two rooms, telling him that the stage was set for the next scene, and only awaiting his entrance.

Hurrying the captive woman along through the narrow passage, Prince Lucifer suddenly paused to permit her startled eyes to take in the scene which had been prepared for her especial benefit.

Andrew Merrydew and Luther Merrydew—to use the name by which Una alone knew Calvin Solander—were seated on the rocky floor, bound and gagged, the younger man with a bloody bandage wound about his head, and ugly red streaks marking his pale face.

About each neck was a noosed rope, the free ends of which were held by as many cowed ruffians, while Ruby Solander and the third Imp stood near, each showing a cocked revolver and a bared knife.

With an art that did credit to his training, the fat lawyer cast a mutely appealing look into that pale and frightened face. As for his younger companion, there was no pretense in that look of passionate love which glowed in his dark, magnetic eyes.

So realistic was the picture that poor Una never once thought of doubting its perfect reality, and a gasping cry of mingled despair and pity broke from her blanched lips.

"Poor guardy—Luther!" she gasped, and only for that supporting hand, she would have sunk helplessly to the floor.

"They are safe and sound—the young man has only received a superficial wound which will heal in a day or so," coldly said Prince Lucifer, pitilessly following the path he had marked out for himself. "They are safe and sound—as yet! But how long that will be the case depends wholly and solely upon your manner of acting, Miss Freestone, when the whole situation is placed before you.

"If you act wisely, smothering a silly pique which arose through an innocent mistake, and accept the prize which is put within reach of your hands, then all well and good. These two men will be given both life and liberty. You will be given—But wait a bit," with a short and wicked laugh as he harked back:

"The first consequence of silly obstinacy on your part will be two deaths: those of the gentlemen whom you see before you with hempen collars already fitted about their necks. They shall hang, to slowly strangle to death—and that before the eyes of the foolish woman who preferred to be a double murderer to bending her proud neck an inch or two!"

If ever eyes spoke eloquently unto other eyes, it was then and there, with Andrew Merrydew as the chief artist!

More plainly than words could have done so, he begged the poor girl to have pity upon him and to save him from such a shameful and hideous death.

Prince Lucifer lingered just long enough to permit this silent appeal to have full effect, then he tightened his grip on Una's arm, leaving the chamber by a second passage which carried them into still a third chamber or natural opening in the heart of the hill.

This, like the others, was dimly illuminated by the use of candles, and the frightened eyes of Una Freestone fell upon several dark figures standing near the center of the enlargement.

At first she could distinguish nothing more, but as one of those figures gave a sudden cry of curiously mingled emotions, her eyes opened more widely, and that cry was echoed back with—

"Mark—Mr. Bywater!"

"You pitiless cur!" panted High-water Mark, his face showing how intensely he was suffering through his love for the unfortunate girl. "I'll kill you for this if ever I get free hands again!"

"You can go, Imps," coolly said Prince Lucifer, with a wave of his free hand which sent the cowed ruffians gliding silently out of the cavern to resume their duties outside, leaving the three persons the sole occupants of that chamber.

Drawing a knife, the chief stooped and severed the bonds that held the maiden's hands behind her, then stepped swiftly forward and cut those holding Mark's feet glued to one spot,

drawing back quickly as though anticipating a desperate kick for reward, laughing grimly as he once more stood erect to say:

"Instead of killing, I deserve thanks for bringing two loving hearts together! I'll give you just one half-hour in which to make up and accept my terms; to choose between a funeral or a wedding! That ought to be long enough grace, surely!" as he turned and strode away.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOW MARK ARGUED AGAINST HIMSELF.

WITHOUT giving a chance for another word, either of menace or of entreaty, Prince Lucifer vanished from sight, leaving the young couple alone with each other.

The rock chamber was smaller than either of the others, and, so far as the casual glance could take note, there was only the one narrow passage leading to or from it.

Unlike each of the former enlargements, this was absolutely without accommodation for sitting or reclining, save on the bare rock floor itself.

Alone with each other!

Una stood with bowed head, her hands clasped tightly before her, a faint flush slowly chasing that corpse-like pallor from her lovely face. For ringing through her brain were the words spoken by that terrible man in the black hood: you must marry him or die!

And Mark Bywater was hardly less agitated, for the time being, and though he knew now how deeply, how completely he loved this maiden, just then he felt that he would far rather have been penned up, with hands bound, in company with a hungry mountain lion.

His handsome face flushed and paled. His big blue eyes were downcast, barely daring to take in as much as the hem of her dress. Until he began to realize that precious time was passing, and that for her dear sake he must rally his wits and school his emotions.

"Una—Miss Freestone?"

Her eyes lifted, her faint blush deepening, her hands unlocking and even lifting as though in self-surrender. Only to be drawn nervously back and used to hide her fair face from view as she caught that love-look in his eyes.

If his hands had not been bound behind his back, Mark Bywater would have added other steps to that involuntary one, and, catching the trembling maiden to his manly breast, doubtless have changed his resolution altogether. As it was, he was reminded how helpless he was to aid or support her, save by his words and example.

His brain ceased its drunken reeling, his wits seemed to clear as by magic, and, in steady tones, he spoke again:

"Miss Freestone, will you listen to what I think ought to be said without further delay?"

"If—oh, sir, is there no way to escape from that terrible man?"

"If there be, we can probably hit upon it sooner by trying to keep cool—by trying to view the ugly situation from all sides, Miss Freestone," said Mark, finding his tongue curiously clumsy and difficult to keep in the path which he had elected as the best and proper one, for her sake.

This task was by no means lessened, now that Una had gained courage and steadiness enough to look him fairly in the face; a look in which he could read faint hope, a touch of reproach and—his own eyes closed and he caught his breath sharply, holding it until he nearly burst his lungs.

For right or wrong, he believed that Una loved him still! Surely, her glorious eyes had betrayed her secret, all unconsciously. And yet—better perhaps had she continued to hate and scorn him!

"To begin with," he said, his voice having a strange, unnatural sound in his own ears. "You must know, Miss Freestone, that we have fallen into the hands of ruffians who will permit nothing to come between their plans and complete success. For myself, I care little. But for you—my only care and wish is to serve and save you from harm."

It was a rather lame conclusion, but it seemed sufficient to deepen that blush on the maiden's face, and after a shy glance into his pale countenance, she murmured, so faintly that only a love-trained ear could have caught each word aright:

"Mr. Bywater—Mark—did you make a jest of—you know?"

There was no immediate reply, and with her blush fading, Una lifted her eyes to that white face, to have them held as fascinated by his steadily-glowing orbs through that grave, earnestly-spoken explanation.

"I did say those cruel words, Miss Freestone, but you must do now what you refused to do then: listen to my excuse. I did say that the millions left behind by Paul Solander were quite enough to bribe a man into marrying a witch, but it was merely a careless jest on my part, and then—I had not yet seen you!"

"It was—cre—"

"It has carried its punishment with it, and never more surely—But let the matter drop just now, Miss Freestone," abruptly, his tones growing a little harsh as he fought back the strong

temptation to lay his inner heart bare for her inspection. "That devil in human shape has left us together for a purpose, and we must decide on some line of action before his time of grace has run out."

There was a brief pause, for neither felt the subject an easy one to fairly broach. But then, once more in full command of his nerves, Mark Bywater spoke rapidly, earnestly:

"With so much at stake, Miss Freestone, you will not blame me for too plain speaking, or accuse me of being inconsiderate. So—you are aware of the main reason why this villain—Oran Solander, as I firmly believe he should be called—brought you here?"

"He said—oh, how can I tell—you?" sobbed the poor girl, once more hiding her warmly-flushing face in her trembling hands.

"He said that you must consent to marry me," slowly uttered Mark, even in that moment feeling a vague surprise at his voice sounding to his own ears so much like that of a stranger. "I know, because he has over and over declared the same thing to me. But—it must not be!"

Una Freestone gave a start, then shrank back a little. Mark closed his eyes and bit his lip until the red blood tinged his white teeth as he saw that. Surely—and yet, for her dear sake, he must hold firm unto the end!

"It must not be, I say, Miss Freestone, because in so acting you would be committing suicide—just as surely as though you had driven a knife-blade through your heart!"

"And you—you only speak of me, Mr. Bywater?" murmured Una, venturing to steal a shy glance through her opening hands once more.

"It Oh, I'm a man, and don't count," was the quiet response. "I'm taking thought for and of you, just now, and that's why I dare to utter words which— You will not altogether misunderstand me, Una?"

For an instant the barrier broke away, and if ever Una Freestone had seriously doubted his love for her, she could do so no longer. It shone in his handsome face. It glowed in his blue eyes. It echoed through each husky, tremulous word until—

"Mark—old friend—"

But Mark Bywater turned sharply away, averting his face and shutting his eyes to those hands as they came slowly, flutteringly toward him. Not even then would he give up his stern resolve, though he, too, had read something of the glad truth in her eyes.

He heard her sob—for that swift catching of the breath could hardly be called less. He knew that he had cruelly wounded the pure heart which he would have given all the world else to call his own. But it was for her own good, and that knowledge helped to sustain and make him strong enough to carry his resolution through to the end.

His face cold and stern set, his eyes a blank, so far as the betrayal of real emotion was concerned, Mark Bywater turned once more to his companion in captivity, speaking rapidly, earnestly, yet more like a stranger than a lover.

"Miss Freestone, there is no time to cut to waste in beating about the bush. We are in an ugly box, and though a way out of it is offered us, that way leads to almost certain destruction.

"The devil who brought us here, is Oran Solander. His son and his daughter are aiding him, I'm almost positive. They are playing for the fortune, real or imaginary, left behind by Paul Solander, Oran's brother.

"That fortune, as you know, was left to you and me, provided we met, fell in love with each other, and should wed. That failed, of itself, and now these merciless demons are trying to bring it about, in order to reap the benefit themselves."

"He said—he gave me to understand that my refusal would doom to death all others," faintly murmured Una, her fair face flushing.

"To frighten you into entering the trap," coldly said Mark, steeling his heart once more. "He lied, for at your death, or mine, the fortune goes to charity, cutting him out forever! But if this marriage was to take place, leaving us still in his power—can't you see, child?" with sudden impatience, born of sharp pain at having to argue against his own intense love and longing. "They would murder us, and then fatten on that accursed gold!"

"For your sake—and for mine—you must stand firm, Una Freestone. You must refuse to even listen to his abominable proposition, or we are both as good as dead! Swear to me that you—"

A wild, strange uproar cut him short at that instant.

CHAPTER XXX.

HOW SILVER-TIP COVERED HIMSELF WITH GLORY.

On leaving the lovers together, Prince Lucifer at once retraced his steps to where that little farce had been played for Una Freestone's especial benefit, and brief as had been his absence, he found both Andrew Merrydew and Calvin Solander freed from their bonds and neck ornaments.

The fat old lawyer was turning over the out-

fling cryptograms, racking his brains as he had done hundreds of times before, searching for the precious clew which he felt confident lay hidden somewhere among those pen-printed characters. Or—was it to be found in those scattered holes burnt through the otherwise blank ends?

"They mean something!" he growled, scowling viciously at the black-edged perforations, then glancing up at the sound of those coming steps. "Confound it, Solander! are we all born idiots? Isn't there gumption enough in all our craniums combined to cipher this clumsy puzzle out?"

"It calls for a lunatic, not a fool!" flashed Calvin, with an ugly scowl that distorted his otherwise handsome enough features. "A crazy brain hatched it up, a crazy hand drew it out, and only crazy wits would ever pretend to see aught of sense or reason in it."

"Simmer, kid," curtly uttered Prince Lucifer, flashing a stern glance into that sorely-discontented face, then turning toward Merrydew and his cryptograms. "I've set the only sure clew to unwinding itself, partner, and all that lacks is a bit of patient waiting on our part."

"You mean—they're playing doves, eh?" chuckled the oily lawyer, as he read that tone aright.

"If not just that, be sure we'll find them ready enough to listen to reason when the time comes to put on the screws," laughed Oran Solander, taking a seat after a stern glance toward his children, who were only held in subjection by their personal fear of his hot anger.

"The little lady really swallowed all that bombast about hanging us two miserable creatures, did she?" asked Merrydew, seemingly in huge enjoyment over the deliberate fraud. "Never once smelled a mice?"

"She took it for Gospel, of course, for you both played the rôle to perfection. And Bywater—well, if I haven't read him all wrongly, he'll fight our battles for us. Though he tried to hide it close, I'm positive he loves that girl a thousand times better than he loves his own life!"

Ruby Solander uttered a choking cry and sprung to her feet from the knee of her brother, where she had been resting up to now. Her tightly-clinched hand was uplifted, and she seemed on the point of bursting into fierce objection, but before she could do more or say aught the same wild uproar which had cut Mark Bywater short came rumbling through the cavern, startling one and all into silence.

There were sudden shots, shrill yells and hoarser cries, mingling with rumbling sounds not so readily interpreted by those who stood or sat as if spellbound for the time being!

All these sounds plainly came from outside the cavern, and almost certainly from the ledge which ran along in front of and far beyond the entrance on either hand.

"Great Scott!" gasped Andrew Merrydew, his florid face turning to the color of badly-mixed putty, his little eyes protruding from their sockets and seemingly on the point of tumbling over his puffy cheeks.

"That devil again!" cried Prince Lucifer, leaping up and kicking over the stool upon which he had been sitting. "Ready, all, to—"

Before he could say more, a cowled figure came plunging into the chamber, falling to the floor with a hoarse, panting cry of:

"Hell's bu'sted—wide open—boss! I've—kicked my last—Agh-gh-h!"

His head fell with a bump, his figure quivering as though in the last agonies of a painful death.

"Quick! all of you!" cried Prince Lucifer, springing over that prostrate figure and rushing toward the cave entrance.

Side by side Calvin Solander and his sister Ruby followed, the fat lawyer alone lingering, for the outlaws who had acted as waiting henchmen during that little farce for Una's benefit had been dismissed as soon as their chief took the maiden to meet Mark Bywater.

"Good Lord!" gasped Merrydew, his fingers trembling so that he could hardly use them at all as he tried to pick up and secure those precious cryptograms. "What a life! It's more than the cursed fortune is worth—and we not—"

In his frightened haste, Andrew Merrydew was all unconscious of the strange resurrection of that black-cowled corpse.

No sooner had the Solanders left the cavern, than that being silently lifted a head to glance swiftly around the chamber. He saw nothing to cause alarm, and springing lightly to his feet, drawing a revolver at the same instant, he sprung forward and brought the weapon down with terrible force on the bowed head of the old lawyer.

With only a gasping moan, the stricken wretch dropped across the slab table, then slipped limply from it to the floor, his distorted face turned upward in the dim candle-light.

"Down goes your meat-house, anyway!" grimly chuckled the Imp, as he saw that there was no need of striking another blow. "Didn't mean to bu'st your shell wide open, but ef I hev—well, you're old a-plenty fer to be jumpin' over the range!"

One of the cryptograms fluttered to the rock

floor, disturbed by the fall of the lawyer, and the black hood instantly stooped to secure it, then taking the other from the table, he swept the chamber with a keen, comprehensive glance.

There was nothing to disturb him, and a grim chuckle passed his lips as he noted the side passage, different from the one through which he had made such a dramatic entrance.

Stooping, he gave Andrew Merrydew a brief examination—barely sufficient to assure himself that his stroke had not killed the villain, though the shock would surely hold his senses fast-locked for hours.

"Plenty long fer all two both o' us," he chuckled, rising and moving toward the second passage. "The critter didn't see what hit him, an' when he does come to, he'll never be able fer to sw'ar 'twasn't the Ole Boy done it all—toted off Dan Dickman as well as bu'sted his bald pate!"

Catching a candle from a point of rock near the passage, the black hood hurried through the narrow tunnel, quickly emerging into a fourth chamber, where two figures—one of a woman with her arms flung about the neck of a young man—greeted his sparkling eyes.

"Back, you devil!" harshly cried Mark Bywater, struggling to burst the bonds that held his arms helpless. "I'll kill you before—"

"The prettiest devil you ever clapped the two peepers o' ye onto in the hull course o' yer pussonal 'sperience, boss, an' I'm open fer to bet big dollars 'ginst weenty coppers that you'll say so your own sweet self when—an' hyar she goes, too!"

With a low, exultant laugh the black hood was removed, laying bare a face which Mark Bywater had to look at twice before fairly recognizing: the honest, friendly face of Sidney Rocket!

"Hed to take a sorter shave, ye see, pard," half-sheepishly muttered the mountaineer, rasping his stubble-covered chin with a rueful touch. "Ca'se why—"

"You've come—Can we go?" hurriedly interposed Mark. "If not, give me a show to fight that devil! My hands are bound—"

"They was, but I don't reckon they ain't so no longer," laughed Silver-tip Sid, a touch of his keen blade causing the thongs to drop to the rock floor. "An' now—"

With rare politeness in one of such rude speech, Rocket sharply turned on his heels, softly whistling to himself while staring at vacancy or the rock wall.

For the first use Mark made of his freedom was to return that frightened embrace with ten-fold interest!

When that alarm broke out, Una, in terror, flung her arms about his neck and hid her white face in his bosom. And so—Well, for one brief breath Mark would not deny himself.

"Not that I'm in sech a mighty heap o' hurry, boss," at length uttered Silver-tip Sid, still staring at the rock wall. "But—mebbe ye'll take notice that the racket out yen' way is sorter simmerin' down. An' ef the hull durn' outfit was to come b'ilin' right in hyar—Waal, mebbe it'd be safer fer we'uns of them didn't was to find us stoppin' hyar a-waitin' fer 'em to ax what're we gwine fer to do!"

"Is there any possible way of getting out?" hastily asked Mark, limiting his embrace to a single arm about the waist of the maiden, but clasping her hand with his other fingers.

"Waal, I should ree-mark ef they wasn't!" grinned Silver-tip, leading the way to the rear of the chamber, where the cavern seemingly ended in a shallow rift or crack. "Ef you'll jest take a step a-top o' my back, an' feel ith the two eyes o' ye up yan', I'mbettin' big dollars—that's the how so, pardner!" bracing himself as Mark Bywater lightly mounted his back, candle in hand, to utter a low cry of startled joy.

Before his wide eyes was an opening large enough for the passage of a human body, and as he thrust his light further into it, he could see that the hole enlarged only a few feet beyond.

"Jest slide up thar, pardner, an' I'll holp the little lady fer to foller suit," said Silver-tip Sid, briskly. "Every minnit counts fer a hull hour, jest now, ye want to keep a'-membering, boss!"

That warning was superfluous, for Mark Bywater was already drawing himself into the opening, creeping back until he could turn and thus present his face to the entrance when Silver-tip should lift Una up to his arms.

This was quickly done, the maiden too greatly bewildered to offer resistance through delicacy or a mistaken fear of what might be before her in that strange refuge.

"Thank Heaven!" fervidly exclaimed High-water Mark as he drew Una back until the passage was large enough for them to turn again. "I did not dare to hope for such an ending as this! I thought—"

"That the ole boss hed deserted ye, eh?" chuckled Silver-tip Sid, bringing a couple of candles with him, one of which he offered to Mark. "Waal, 'be co'se ye deserved that he should, but—the ole man was borned a pesky idjit, an' I reckon it's best he keeps a-gwine on in the same trail—eh?"

"You dear old fraud!" laughed Mark, grasp-

ing a hand and squeezing it until he made the bones fairly snap. "I'llowe you more than life, from this hour on!"

"It's putt down in figgers as black as mem'ry kin prent 'em, pard," was the grinning reply, followed by the sensible observation: "But we hain't got thar jist yit, ye want to know. An' ef we ever hope to, it cain't be did by stickin' right hyar like bumps on a log on the head devil comes with his imps fer to—le's mosey, pard!"

"Then there is a passage by which we can reach the outer air?"

"Look at the can'els a-wavin' all one way," curtly nodded Silver-tip Sid, then moving along that contracted passage as though the fact needed no further elaboration.

It was a slow, tedious journey, let the fugitives make such haste as they might, for at times the tunnel contracted so much that only by crawling could they effect any progress at all. But Silver-tip kept his companions from despairing, by declaring that he himself had more than once forced his way through to open air.

His predictions were at length verified, and as Mark Bywater drew Una Freestone through the narrow opening into the fresh air of early morning, it was with difficulty that he could refrain from clasping her to his bosom and sending forth a wild cheer of defiance to their foes.

"Ef you don't mind helpin' me, take a bit lean onto this dornick, pard," said Silver-tip Sid, pressing against a tall boulder which stood on end near the opening. "So!" with a low, exultant laugh as the rock toppled over to forever conceal that mode of exit. "The latch-string is hangin' out, but them Imps is on the wrong side fer to ketch hold o' it—waal, they jest be, now!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A TRAGEDY OF THE NIGHT.

As Prince Lucifer rushed through the chambers forming the cavern, his first and main thought was that the unknown marksman, who had killed Bruiser just in time to preserve the life of High-water Mark, had renewed his daring attack, but this time with a strong force to back his efforts.

"No one man could kick up such a row! Steady, kids, and if we have to shoot—shoot to kill!" he cried, in harsh tones, casting a glance over a shoulder at his two offspring just before plunging through the narrow opening which led out upon the rock ledge.

He could hear his Imps yelling, and knew that, if not entirely, they were doing the greater part of the firing, and in his eagerness to learn the whole truth, he burst through the leafy screen with a bound that carried him half-way across the shelf itself.

The greatest confusion came from the left, or in the direction of the trail by which the horses had been taken from the gulch up to the belt-like shelf of rock.

Turning in that direction with his harsh slogan crossing his lips, Prince Lucifer beheld a wild, weird spectacle—a human figure apparently clad in roaring flames, swiftly shooting through the air!

He had barely time for that one glance, for then, with shrill, terror-stricken neighs and cries, the horses came rushing along the ledge in a frantic stampede, with that figure of fire bounding along in their rear, roaring, thundering, sending out a maniacal peal of laughter that, while it lasted, dominated all other sounds.

With yells of angry fright he saw his men in flight, leaping close against the rock wall to escape being crushed beneath those furiously trampling hoofs, and with a grating curse of furious rage, he acted in the same manner, coming into violent contact with his son, Calvin, as they both hurriedly made for the cave entrance.

"Ruby—God of mercy!"

In almost a shriek issued those words from the lips of Oran Solander, as he regained his balance, just in time to catch a glimpse of his daughter, trying to recover herself from an unfortunate slip of the foot. Then—the mad stampede whirled by the cave entrance, and for an instant shut off all sight without.

The ledge was bare of all human life! The figure of the daring young Amazon was gone—whither?

With a whirling brain Prince Lucifer asked himself this question, and leaped half blindly through the bushes, just in time to come full in the track of that wild, flaming figure to whom all this must be attributed.

"Fie, ye howling devils! Hide your evil faces from the sovereign whom ye have so long—Ha!" stopping short and swinging those flaring torches above his head as his gaze fell upon the black-hooded figure which so abruptly barred the way. "Kneel, ye rebell! Down—"

With a cry that was almost as insane and even more deadly in its mad fury, Prince Lucifer leaped straight at the throat of the wild figure, bearing it down before him, the terrible shock

as they fell to the rocky shelf causing him to turn end for end.

But while he regained his footing with cat-like celerity, the poor King of the Mountains lay motionless, seemingly a corpse!

Calvin Solander had been a spectator of all this, his limbs spellbound for the moment as he realized the awful fate which almost certainly had overtaken his sister: the one relative whom he really loved with a spark of pure generosity. But now he broke the spell, crying hoarsely as he sprang forward:

"Kill the dog! It's Paul Solander! Kill him, as he killed—"

Only for that cry, that name, almost surely Prince Lucifer would have been a murderer, for his bared blade was flashing in the moonlight as he crouched for a death-leap upon his fallen foe-man.

"Back, kid!" he panted, flinging aside his knife, and leaping forward with open hands to check his white-faced son. "He's worth more to us alive than dead, and—"

"Ruby—he caused her death!"

For a single breath Prince Lucifer was staggered by those words, and fearing lest he had received a mortal injury in that collision, Calvin Solander instinctively flung his arms about him.

The Imps, now that the stampede had passed by, came rushing back from their hastily-sought coverts, eager to do what their chief thought best under those wholly unexpected circumstances.

"We never knowed—it come like a bu'st of whirlygusts!" gasped one of their number, incoherently.

"Jest a yelp an' then a hull grist o' dornicks tumblin' like it was out o' the clouds!"

"An' a critter all on fire fer to—"

This very confusion served Prince Lucifer well, since it seemed to scatter his own bewildered wits, only to have them rally on the instant, clearer, steadier than ever.

"Look to that devil, some of you," he cried, pushing Calvin from him and pointing toward the still motionless King of the Mountains. "Drag him inside. Have him there for me when I come back, or I'll murder every mother's son o' yel!"

With a swift swoop he caught up one of the pine torches which the madman had dropped at that furious assault, whirling it about his head until the glowing coals burst into a brilliant blaze, hoarsely crying, as he turned toward the foot-trail winding down to the level of the gulch below:

"Come, kid! The little girl's gone over the rocks!"

Calvin Solander mechanically caught up the other torch, bearing it glowing, smoking, too badly shaken to think of renewing its brilliant life as his father had done with the other.

With reckless speed Prince Lucifer descended the winding path to the gulch, turning and running swiftly along until—

A hoarse, inarticulate cry burst from his lips as his wild eyes fell upon that dark and silent mass lying amidst a splintered bush.

He dropped his torch and sunk to his knees beside the gruesome spectacle. His trembling hands almost timidly touched all that remained of what had, but a brief space before, been a living being, dear beyond all else earthly to his wayward soul. Now—

"Is she—not dead, father!" gasped Calvin, supporting himself by the rock wall close to the base of which the unfortunate young woman had fallen when flung or crowded from the ledge by that mad stampede.

His voice seemed to awaken the stricken parent, and with a harsh, gasping cry he tossed back his head, flinging out both hands, by that action apparently hurling aside his grief and stupor. For, curiously enough, his tones were even, cold, showing little or no emotion.

"Dead—yes, she's dead. The bushes saved her some—not enough—not quite enough, but still they saved her face for us. See!"

And he caught up the still blazing torch, holding it so that the light fell fairly athwart the white, ghastly face from which he had removed the sable hood.

Only a few superficial scratches marred that once beautiful face, but even Calvin Solander could not doubt the certainty of her death. Though the face had been spared, the body—

"Poor girl!" with a choking in his throat as he gazed, but which was not enough to kill all germs of hatred toward another. "Dead—and who killed her? Who but that cursed Mark Bywater?"

"Take the torch, kid," steadily muttered Prince Lucifer, seemingly without hearing his son's harsh words. "I'll carry the little girl up yonder. The dew is falling, an'—Fool!" with a short, harsh laugh at his own speech: "As thou hast care for a trill like that!"

"I tell you, father, Mark Bywater is her murderer!" fiercely repeated Calvin, but mechanically accepting the torch. "Only for that cursed devil, poor Ruby would be alive and well. Only for him, we—"

"Steady, kid!" as he gently lifted those broken, bleeding remains in his strong arms, drawing the lifeless clay close to his broad breast and holding it there—a father carries a sleeping

infant. "Throw the light where I can see how to step. No need to jar the poor child. Go on ahead. I can carry her—as I used to do!"

Still in that frightfully calm, even tone of voice! Still without any outward show of grief or regret.

And, awed despite that vicious hatred felt for a rival who had won the love of the woman whom he himself coveted as a bride, Calvin Solander lighted the way back to and up the winding trail, followed by Prince Lucifer with his ghastly burden.

Reaching the shelf, he bore the corpse into the cavern, gently depositing it in a corner, then rising erect to give a start as his haggard eyes fell upon the guarded madman, who lay seemingly a corpse.

He started forward, dropping to his knees beside the wild figure, gazing keenly, intently into that hair-covered face, then gasping:

"Paul—Brother Paul, is it indeed you—still living?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

NOW MARK READ THE RIDDLE.

As Silver-tip Sid uttered those words, High-water Mark joined in his laugh, though with lingering uneasiness in his tones and face.

That wild tumult had ceased. Not a sound came from the other side of the range, through which they had so recently passed. Not a sound came from beneath that huge bowlder by means of which they had hermetically sealed up the narrow crevice.

And yet—surely their escape must have been discovered ere this? And if discovered, Prince Lucifer and his Imps would know no rest until every possible effort had been made to recover their prizes.

"Those devils will come boiling over the ridge, or around the sides!" he muttered, his arm closing more tightly about the waist of the maiden as he turned away.

"It'll take time in hull gobs, pardner," laughed Silver-tip Sid, yet obediently yielding to that unspoken desire, leading the way through the gray dawn. "Tain't like the back door wasn't done set tight an' locked 'ith a key which none o' them critters is man 'nough fer to turn wide open, ye want to know—not any! It's a traipse o' good hafe a day fer a nimble fut to tote a body so fur as this, the way they hev to come."

"By that time we ought to strike the stage-trail!"

"Waal, I don't see sech a monstrous rush," quietly replied Silver-tip, with a fleeting glance toward Una, which sufficiently pointed his real meaning. "An' I'm clean tuckered out, pardner! Fact is, ef I Cain't ketch a rest an' forty winks—Waal, I've jest got to do it both, now!"

"My poor girl!" muttered Mark, sending a little thrill along the arm which so tenderly supported her weary steps. "I forgot that you must be completely worn out with all you've passed through this night."

Una protested against the idea of pausing even for a minute, but her fears of recapture spoke, not her real strength. And understanding this, Mark urged his friend to seek out a secure resting-place where the maiden might pass a few hours under their vigilant guard.

For half an hour more Sidney Rocket led them through the growing dawn, then came to a halt in a snug nest high up on a peak, from whence they could gain an extended view without being themselves exposed to any unfriendly eyes.

"They's drink a bit down yen'way," with a nod toward the slope beyond, "an' I got 'nough dry grub fer to feed a hull rijimint ef they didn't want to eat too pesky much."

"It is safe to pause?" faltered Una, struggling against the fatigue which was fairly overpowering her. "Those evil wretches cannot find us here, if we stop to rest a little while?"

"Not ef they hed eyes o' eagles an' noses o' bloodhoun's, ma'm," promptly declared Silver-tip, with a low bow that did honor to his native politeness. "Over sech a flinty stretch they couldn't smell out the ghost of a track; an' we'll be keepin' watch over ye, too, ma'm!"

"You can trust him implicitly, Un—Miss Freestone," stammered Mark, the warm blood climbing up to his close-cropped curls.

"I know—he saved our lives," simply replied Una, her eyes dim with unshed tears of heartfelt gratitude as she reached out a hand to grasp that honest if not over-clean paw. "My friend, I thank you!"

"Good Lawd!" fairly snorted Silver-tip Sid, as he drew back his paw, much as he might if those warm fingers had sent an electric shock tingling through his every fiber. "I didn't mean—I'm mighty durn glad of it, ma'am!"

Una laughed hysterically, and fearing for her overtasked powers, Mark asked Silver-tip to bring some water, since he declared a spring was not far distant.

And while the veteran was running off to carry out this request, Mark took off his coat and vest, shaping them into as comfortable a couch as might be, gently forcing Una to lie down.

"You must obey, Miss—Una," he said, forcing

a smile as he altered his mode of address. "Unless you regain some strength, we may be kept here for days, even!"

"But you—"

"The sun is coming up, and I'll soon be only too warm. Don't make me scold you—so soon, Miss Freestone!"

"Then—call me Una, as you—"

"Una, my—sister!"

That was hardly the term which first rose to his lips, and Mark felt his face turning crimson as those weary but still beautiful eyes cast a glance—was it of reproach?

But Silver-tip could be heard returning, and Una simply had time to murmur, softly:

"Mark, my dear brother!"

If Silver-tip noticed aught uncommon in either face as he came hustling on the scene with a pocket-flask filled with cool, fresh water, be sure he was far too shrewd to let aught appear in his own honest countenance. And Una drank gratefully. And if there lingered a flavor of bad whisky about the flask, she was too thoughtful to remark as much.

And then, wearily refusing the dry food which Silver-tip Sid produced for her benefit, she lay back, closing her lids, almost instantly falling asleep, so completely was she exhausted by all she had been called upon to undergo of late.

The two men drew aside, gazing long and keenly in the direction from whence their enemies must come, if at all, but without seeing aught to cause them uneasiness.

"It's great big dollars to teenty weenty cents that they'll never hit off the way we raally come," grinned Silver-tip, rubbing his paws in high glee. "Fer ef they knowed o' that hole through the back door, would they hev left you two in thar alone? An' the little lady 'ith full use o' them weenty fingers o' hern?"

"But—you knew of it!" frowned Mark, uneasily.

"Lucky, too," with a nod of quiet satisfaction. "But ef they did, an' wastakin' sech resks, what matter? They can't lift up that dornick we turned over, an' they'd hev to pull back an' come round t'other way. Which they hain't done, or we'd see 'em now, swarmin' all over the bills. An' so—as I'm open to bet—they never knowed it, an' ef they've diskivered your gittin' away yit, they'll hunt fer ye from the front door as a starter!"

"What kicked up that row? Not your doing, surely?"

"You tell, fer I don't begin to know how," nodded Silver-tip. "I was playing Imp 'long 'ith the best of 'em, tryin' fer to smell ye out, when the row bu'sted wide open. An' then—Waal, I jest 'proved the openin' the best I knowed how!"

He went on to describe his movements ever since he heard the firing along the stage-trail, and Mark listened with an interest which may be imagined. And when Silver-tip told how he surprised Andrew Merrydew—"a fat ole critter," as he described the lawyer—and secured the cryptograms, Mark fairly boiled over with excitement.

Then, leaving Silver-tip on guard duty, he settled down to examining the twin puzzles, vigorously following out a clew which he felt almost positive was the correct one.

This clew, it may be as well to remark in this connection, was one he had gained through long and keen study of his own copy of that hidden secret. Vague, uncertain, yet sufficiently promising to induce him to make a journey to that wild region, with Silver-tip Sid as a guide—a clew based on a single pen-printed word: "Satan's."

"Satan's Ear," Sidney Rocket had suggested, among many other Tartarean titles, and now, with a swift catching of his breath, Mark Bywater saw that very word boldly printed in the copy of the cryptogram bequeathed to Una Freestone!

And more—it occupied a square which, if transferred to his own document, would mark the precise point where, in a knight's move at chess, that piece would naturally rest!

This fact assured the young man that he was at last on the right track, and forgetting hunger, thirst, fatigue—everything save the absorbing task before him—he labored hour after hour, now and then marking down word after word on a leaf of his note-book.

Several times Silver-tip Sid came to report nothing suspicious was to be seen, but as often did he steal back to his position, smiling grimly at what he had seen.

"Odds big as a house that he'll git thar! Git thar!" with a low, confident laugh. "He's gittin' thar right a'ready, my pard is!"

But it was not until long after the sun had crossed the meridian that, with a cry of triumph, Mark Bywater completed his victory.

The riddle was unriddled, the secret a secret no longer!

Una started to her feet with a faint cry of terror at that shout, and Mark was quickly by her side, reassuring the maiden, blaming himself for having so brutally broken her much-needed rest.

"You are not to blame. I was already opening my eyes. Only—at first I thought that dreadful man was coming!"

"Don't give him another thought, Miss Freestone, but think— Ay!" with a laugh of happy triumph as he caught her gaze turning to the cryptograms which he held in his hand. "I've solved the mystery at last, and if the hidden bonanza left by Paul Solander is anything more than a phantom of gold, it shall materialize before another week rolls over our heads!"

Una gazed into his flushed face with strange intentness. To Silver-tip Sid it seemed as though she would have preferred a far different discovery, and he hid his face as he chuckled softly:

"Which it'll come in good time, lady-bird! Bet it jest will, now!"

Blind in his moment of long-deferred triumph, Mark saw naught of this, read nothing beyond glad wonder in those limpid eyes, and seating himself near the maiden, he spoke rapidly:

"For a long time I've suspected that the secret was to be read by following the moves of a knight, at chess; but those figures bothered me. Now I feel confident they were placed there as a mere blind, to fill up the squares left vacant by dividing the one chess-board into two, printing a word for a move, alternately on each piece of parchment.

"Though I've long felt this, I was baffled by not having a copy of your cryptogram, and—"

"You sent me a copy of yours, and if you had left me your address, I would have sent you one of mine in return," softly said Una.

"I did not know—I had forfeited all right to— But let me read you what I've ciphered out, Miss Freestone," hurriedly abandoning that forbidden ground, taking up his notebook instead and reading:

"Go to Satan's Ear. Mark three miles north by compass, which will bring you to a long valley. Look for big flat rock, with a cross carved on top, its right arm to the east. By compass still, follow right arm until find an old shaft. At the bottom lies my fortune. May it bring my heirs better fortune than it has to me!"

As Mark ceased, his eyes sparkling, his face aglow with exultation, Una forced a smile of gratulation, while Silver-tip Sid spluttered:

"Good Lawd! why, it's jest as e-a-s-y! Durn fool me that I never didn't find it all out my own lonesome self! Waal, now, it jest is!"

"Then you think these, and these," touching the holes burnt in the twin papers, and the figures, "really mean nothing of importance?" ventured Una, like one fearful of giving offense.

Mark grew grave, a troubled light briefly coming into his eyes, though he as swiftly banished it.

"The figures, as I said, I believe to be merely filled in to keep the vacant squares from awakening suspicion of the truth. The holes, I confess, trouble me a little more. Their irregularity is too regular, so to speak, for an accident to have caused them. Yet they, too, may have been but an additional safeguard invented by Paul Solander to guard against wrongful eyes reading his secret."

"Then—you mean to test the truth of those lines?" hesitated Una, the troubled light in her eyes growing stronger.

"As soon as we have placed you in safety—yes!" cried Mark. "You, first, then the less precious treasure!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HOW SILVER-TIP PAVED THE WAY.

THOUGH he had worried through so many years without receiving anything like a fatal wound from the busy bow of Don Cupid, Silver-tip Sid could appreciate the sufferings of others who were less fortunate, and never a man breathed who was ready to do more for their alleviation than was the worthy veteran.

He noticed the fervor which Mark so poorly concealed under those words. He saw the love-light blaze up in each pair of eyes as they met an instant later, and muttering something about taking a look to see if any of the Imps had shown their black hoods, he left the lovers alone.

"Do it, dug-gun ye! Ketch the little angel right up in the two squeezers o' ye—suck the honey from them split-open rosebuds she uses fer to talk through—tell her ye won't never do so any more ef she'll— Good Lawd! ef I was only jest him—wouldn't I?"

Not a doubt of it, judging by the fervor with which the worthy old fellow hugged himself in anticipation. But Mark Bywater was not Silver-tip Sid, and, though it cost that young man a sore struggle, he won the victory over himself, and let that glorious opportunity pass unimproved.

It had been such a miserable cause for quarreling, after all! Simply the careless speech made by a very young man, who had never met the girl upon whom those light words seemed to reflect. Words forgotten, and only recalled by the malicious lips of a disappointed lover whose suit had been lightly laughed at.

A few hasty words on both sides, then a separation which had lasted until that strange meeting in the heart of the mountain.

Only in division did either Una or Mark learn how strong he had been their love for the other.

But hard words had been spoken on both sides. Una had charged Mark with avarice, and he had mentally sworn to solve the secret of the Golden Phantom, and, despite the will, to place the entire fortune at her feet. Then—well, at least she would know her harsh judgment of his real motives had been at fault.

Even now, though he must have been blind indeed not to have seen how easily he might win forgiveness for the past, High-water Mark stuck to that resolution, and Silver-tip Sid had his labor for his reward.

As time crept along, nothing was seen or heard of the Imps, and it became almost certain that Silver-tip had been right in his belief that neither Prince Lucifer nor his men were aware of that hidden passage leading through the ridge from the fourth chamber.

And if they reasoned that their captives must have escaped by the entrance opening on the shelf, they surely would never dream of their having fled with faces turned toward the north, directly away from the stage-trail.

Mark Bywater soon summoned Silver-tip Sid to join in their council, and together the trio settled upon the course wisest to follow.

They were to remain where they were until dusk, by which time Una would be sufficiently rested to enable her to bear up under a long and arduous tramp through the hills.

They were to make their way to the stage-trail, lying in hiding near it until the stage for Paragon City came along. One of their number was to hail and stop the stage, making sure that none of their enemies were along as scouts or spies, and that there was room sufficient for three passengers. If not, no doubt gold in plenty could buy off some of the passengers.

"Once at Paragon, you will be perfectly safe, Miss Freestone," added Mark, his handsome face looking bright and cheery as he smoothed over the various difficulties in the path before them. "The Parkers are good, honest, generous, whole-souled people, who will welcome you for your own sweet sake, quite as much as for mine. And knowing that they will guard you tenderly, I'll have a mind perfectly free to follow up this glorious clew to—"

"The Golden Phantom?"

"A rich reality, rather," laughed Mark.

"Ef ye only knowed how rich it was!" muttered Silver-tip Sid, his unevenly-cropp'd head wagging from side to side as he went back to his former post of observation. "Ef you wasn't jest so blind as a pesky mole borned 'bout eyes in the fu'st place! Ef you jest would look fer the full-up-an'-runnin'-over treasure that lays right ready fer the two arms o' ye to hug up an'— Good Lawd! ef the lad keeps on a-actin' sech a pesky fool' part, billy-be-jo-hammered ef I don't take him 'crost the checkered apron o' me an'— An'me all the time pavin' the way fer him to make it smooth an' easy an' free o' bumps, too!"

It may be that Una Freestone also permitted her mind to follow somewhere near that channel, for little by little she grew colder and more reserved. Possibly this was to be expected, as her strength increased and her fears of recapture by those terrible men grew less. Possibly she thought that she had already given Mark too much encouragement, which he seemed to recoil from improving; and in maidenly shame she drew still further back.

Silver-tip Sid noted this change, and inwardly he groaned over it. To think that Mark should be so—ay! worse than blind, for he would not see!

Dusk came, without aught seen or heard of the Imps, and with Sidney Rocket acting as guide, the trio left their 'covert and struck off on their long and weary walk through that wild and broken region, making the best of their way to the stage-trail.

If Silver-tip Sid gave a thought to meek and faithful Moses, whom he had left solitary and alone as guard over that precious cryptogram, he kept it to himself. Possibly he knew that, rather than starve in durance vile, Moses would chew his hitch-rope asunder, after which he could easily forage for himself until his master could return to claim him once more.

Stubbornly sticking to his scheme for "paving the way," Silver-tip took all the hardest work upon himself, giving the lovers frequent chances for private conversation while he stole ahead to scout and spy, leaving them with naught to do save arrive at a full and proper understanding.

But as day dawned and he could read their faces without too openly betraying his anxiety, the veteran was sorely dejected by noting the complete failure of his hopes.

Still he did not entirely despair, and when the vicinity of the Paragon trail was gained, he bade the lovers bide in patience where they were, leaving him to watch for, intercept and arrange for passage on the regular stage when it should come along.

"An' ef you don't range up matters slick an' clean an' full o' honey 'ith the little angel, then I'll—billy-be-jo-hammered ef I don't fall to lovin' my own self—so thar!" he earnestly muttered in the ear of his young employer before taking his departure.

The temptation was strong, but High-water

Mark proved himself still stronger. He would keep his oath; he would never tell the girl how intensely, how wholly his love was hers, until he could place that fortune at her feet, showing his empty hands, proving himself a beggar in comparison. Then—

The young fellow actually forgot that in winning her he would also be winning Paul Solander's fortune! But lovers be queer mortals, and this lover of ours was perfectly honest in his quixotism. And as he was the one who suffered most by it, let him stand excused.

Only for the hopes which he nourished, Silver-tip Sid would have found his a weary enough vigil, for waiting and watching on an empty stomach is trying work; but thus consoling himself, he stuck to his post until the arrival of the stage, which he halted in such an approved style that he frightened two lone passengers half out of their wits.

An understanding was quickly reached with the level-headed driver, and the agreed-upon signal was thrilled forth which speedily brought Mark and Una from their place of retirement, knowing all was well.

Neither of the two passengers could possibly be confounded with any of Prince Lucifer's Imps, and the young couple took seats inside the "hearse," leaving Silver-tip Sid to act as guard from the box-seat.

Never mind the explanation which the veteran gave the inquisitive Jebu; it was quite satisfactory, without in the least endangering the truth. And as Mark had taken inside passage mainly for the purpose of shielding Una from the curiosity of her fellow-passengers, no great amount of annoyance was theirs while rolling along toward Paragon City.

Without event worth recording, that growing place was reached, and Mark shortly after introduced Una to his tried friends, the Parkers.

He explained the situation with clearness enough to set all parties at ease with each other, then forced himself to say adieu.

He cut this as short as possible, fearing to trust himself longer beneath those softly glowing eyes, and bade her wait in patience until he could bring her tidings that the Golden Phantom had materialized!

"I would rather see you bring something else, Mark," Una murmured, her trembling fingers giving his a faint pressure. "Bring me back the true friend I lost through gossiping tongues, please!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NOW THE CRYPTOGRAM WAS TESTED.

"STIDDY, boss! Shet the two eyes o' ye an' trust to the grip o' my han' fer not breakin' the neck o' ye while— Stiddy!"

His face showing very pale, his facial muscles twitching after a curious manner, Mark Bywater obeyed, closing his lids and silently yielding himself to that guiding hand.

Only for a few seconds. Then, with a quietly exultant echo in his voice, Silver-tip Sid turned his companion around and relaxed his grip, saying:

"All 'yes open, pardner! Look straight ahead an' tell a body what ye kin see that looks like somethin' else!"

The first object on which those opening eyes rested was a huge mass of rock. Gradually this mass took shape, growing clearer and plainer until—

"Satan's Ear!"

"Mighty right ye be, pardner!" laughed Silver-tip Sid, shuffling from foot to foot as though strongly tempted to dance for pure delight.

Now that curious resemblance to a gigantic—a tremendously huge ear, weighing thousands of tons—grew stronger and clearer, until Mark Bywater could almost have taken oath that the rocky mass had been intentionally shaped by thousands of chisels during years of steady labor. Perfect, even to the rim, the lobe, the aperture through which sound could reach a cunning brain beyond!

"Good Lawd, yes!" nodded Silver-tip Sid, earnestly. "Sound 'ithout eend! Ef ye was to climb up thar—as I've done more times than a-plenty—you could ketch the weeniest whisper made 'ithin a ten-mile range all over!"

Feeling that he was at last fairly on the verge of solving for all time the mystery overshadowing "The Golden Phantom," Mark Bywater advanced to inspect that curious freak of nature more closely. Only to have the startling resemblance fade and almost vanish as the distance lessened, until, standing at its huge base, the mass of rock was but a rocky mass—nothing more!

Still, this must be their starting-point: there could hardly be two "Satan's Ear" in that region, and from Satan's Ear they were directed to begin their measurements by Paul Solander.

"Mark three miles north, by compass, the cryptogram said," mused High-water Mark, referring to his note-book, though each and every word was burned in upon his brain beyond the remotest possibility of ever escaping.

"Which'll fetch us to a long walley," nodded Silver-tip Sid, with alacrity. "The kumpass is

ready. The walley lays up yan' way. An' ef we don't tote a two-foot rule fer to measure it all off, reckon we kin foller the needle an' find the walley 'ithout bein' so pesky p'tick'lar as all that. An' findin' the walley, look fer a cross cut onto a big flat rock!"

"So the directions read."

"Button up the rest, an' le's go fer them walley an' them rock with the cross carved onto its back," nodded Silver-tip, briskly.

Fully as eager, though a cold shiver ran over his frame at the unwelcome thought that, perhaps in a few short hours more they were doomed to prove that treasure nothing more substantial than an airy phantom, conjured up by a diseased brain, Mark took the course by the reliable pocket-compass which he had procured for that purpose.

There was no need for studying out the proper amount of variation, since the directions said "by compass." And if Paul Solander had intended due north, by the true pole, he surely would have so put it on record. He had taken so many other precautions to render his secret perfect, that he could hardly have fallen into an error of that description.

And so, keeping the needle steady, the two adventurers pressed on, climbing over each and every possible obstacle, and when one presented itself which could not be surmounted, one remained behind to mark the exact line, while his mate gained the right course beyond, to wait in return for the other.

It was a laborious task, for the ground was terribly broken in that direction, but they were laboring for more than gold—or Mark felt that he was—and they grimly persevered.

It was high noon by the sun when they paused on a ridge, gazing down into a long, narrow valley!

"Big dollars ag'inst weenty coppers that we've ketched the right clam!" declared Silver-tip Sid, with suppressed enthusiasm. "An' ef I hadn't picked up a bug, or a chunk o' dirt, or some sech durn' critter, into the two eyes o' me, I'd bet a ole hat I could spot that same big rock o' the cross right from this— Waal, now, I jest would!"

Mark Bywater said nothing. His face was very pale. His eyes won a gleam that was not born of avarice alone.

If he failed to distinguish that cross-branded rock, a far more glorious vision seemed to rise before his eyes and beckon him on: the sweet, loved face of Una Freestone, her own eyes filled with love!

"Shell we dive in, all-heads-under, boss?" at length asked Rocket, looking curiously into the face of his companion.

"Yes, for Una!" muttered Mark, springing from the ledge of rock and hurrying down the rough slope.

But through all he bore his instructions in mind, and shaped his course by the needle until the valley was fairly reached. Then, with a subdued whoop of growing excitement, Silver-tip Sid dashed on in advance, clapping his hands on the edge of a big boulder, leaping up between his arms with ape-like agility, then dancing grotesquely as his eager eyes fell upon a cross cut deeply into the rock!

"Whooraw fer whooray! didn't I tell ye so?" he laughed, bending down to lend Mark an assisting hand, though this aid was hardly needed. "Found ag'in, an' ef we hain't got the tin a-ready, why, we're gittin' thar—gittin' thar with all two both buff! Waal, now, we jest be!"

Beyond a doubt they had found the second clew. The valley was nearly as they could guess, about the required distance from Satan's Ear. The big, flat-topped rock was found. On its surface was a cross, cut too deeply and showing far too plainly not to have been the work of a patient hand.

"Jest as e-a-s-y!" chuckled Silver-tip Sid, who seemed far more delighted than Mark, so far as outward emotions went. "Now—what's the rest o' the d'rections, pardner? I'm in sech a holy hurry fer to git thar clean through that I cain't find time fer to scratch myself whar a pesky flea is out to grazin'—I jest be, fer keeps!"

"The right arm points to the east—see!" muttered High-water Mark, opening his note-book to read what followed.

"By compass still, follow right arm until find an old shaft. At the bottom lies my fortune. May it bring my heirs better fortune than it has to me!"

"Meanin' you an' the little lady, boss?" asked Silver-tip Sid, suddenly growing quiet, earnest, his dark eyes fixed wistfully on the face of his employer and friend, two in one.

"Meaning Miss Freestone and myself—yes!"

"Will it do it, lad? Will it fetch to her an' to you the sort o' luck you'd orter be pinin' fer? Will it— Durn ye, critter!" with a sharp impatience foreign to his nature. "Ef we onkiver this bonanza will it fetch the happyfied light back to them dainty eyes o' hern fer good-an'-all?"

"I hope so!"

Silver-tip heaved a big sigh, his frown vanishing to give place to his usual bright, hopeful expression.

"That's all right, then, an' yar's the paw o'

me onto it, with a grip sech as I keep locked up fer 'special 'casions. 'So!' chuckling grimly as their hands met and closed tightly. "Now I kin go ahead 'thout makin' ready fer a racket."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Jest this: ef I thought that pesky fortune would keep up the p'izen wall between you an' the honey-bird, billy-be-jo-hammered ef I wouldn't bury it so deep that you'd reach it heap sight quicker by takin' a trip to Chiny then from this side—I jest would, now!"

Mark made no reply in words, but his eyes spoke eloquently enough, and it was in high glee that Silver-tip Sid took the required course, which would lead them directly down the middle of the narrow valley.

No particular distance had been marked down in the twin cryptograms, and they were directed to simply follow the course pointed out by the right arm of that carven cross.

Unless the cunning old miner had meant to send them far away and over the hills, the old shaft could not be far distant, since the valley took a sudden turn less than half a mile ahead, and the proper course would carry them out of it and once more into the broken ground, where rocks and rifts were plenty and troublesome.

Then—when almost at the turn of the valley, Silver-tip Sid gave still another yell of wild triumph, pointing to— Surely that rough heap of stones and clay and crumbling dirt marked the mouth of a long-neglected excavation?

It did, and ten seconds later the two men stood at the edge of a deep, dark hole, gazing downward as though they expected to catch the yellow gleam of the Golden Phantom!

Up to this time, neither of the twain had given the gold itself, as merely gold, hardly a thought. They regarded the treasure merely as the shortest, surest, safest means by which two estranged but still loving hearts might be reunited.

But now—how different!

Their faces were almost ghastly pale. Their eyes shone brighter than ever, but it was with a hard, unholy glitter. Their lips were drawn tightly across their clinched teeth, and their breath came in short, hard pants. Their faces showed strange lines, drawn in an instant, as it seemed.

The accursed "yellow fever" had taken full possession of them, and for the time being each was actually distrustful of the other!

"Work—git down to level work, pardner!" grated Silver-tip Sid, in strangely harsh tones for him, as his sinewy fingers gripped an arm tightly. "Fu'st thing's to rig up a windlass. Come an' holp git a log ready, cain't ye, man?"

That broke the spell, so far as Mark Bywater was concerned, but he was far too deeply interested in reaching the bottom of this old shaft—dug by whose arms?—to note the full change worked in his mate and guide.

They had come from Paragon City fully prepared for the work now before them. Each man bore a sharp and heavy hatchet at his belt. Each one had a length of stout if small rope coiled about his waist.

Over against the face of the rising rocks grew a number of stunted pines, the trunks of which would serve their purpose to perfection, especially as they only required a temporary affair by means of which they might lower themselves to the bottom of the old shaft, to prospect and determine the amount of work necessary to perform before the Golden Phantom could be turned into a reality.

The deserted shaft might easily have caved in, covering over the treasure to a depth of many yards!

With their sharp tools, their strong arms, urged on by that fevering anxiety to learn the whole truth, Mark and Rocket made short work of it, dragging back a log which was to serve as windlass around which their ropes might be secured, together with other stout sticks to serve as props and braces. And working as men rarely worked before, they soon had all in readiness for descending into the earth.

Then they paused for breath, gazing at each other for a moment, then averting their eyes to cast a startled look around them as a suspicious sound came to their ears.

"Fire an' fury!" snarled Silver-tip, in wild rage. "Yender comes that devil at the head o' all his Imps!"

He spoke no more than the bitter truth; it was Prince Lucifer!

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOW PRINCE LUCIFER FOUND THE PHANTOM.

A SAVAGE curse broke from the lips of Oran Solander at that accident which alarmed the two men whom he so confidently counted upon taking completely by surprise: the turning of an ankle on a loose fragment of rock, casting its owner endlong out into fair view, making noise quite sufficient to break the spell which held Silver-tip Sid at work.

Prince Lucifer sent a hasty shot after the twain as they darted away from the deserted shaft, making for the friendly rocks where they might hope to hold even such a greatly superior force at bay until the coming of darkness.

"Drop them!" he cried, harshly, murder in his

tones as in his face and redly-glowing eyes. "Cripple if you can, but kill rather than let them get clear!"

Spitefully, the repeaters rung forth, sending their bits of lead with an ugly whir-r-r across the narrow valley, kicking up little puffs of dust around and beyond the fugitives.

And Calvin Solander dropped upon one knee, supporting an elbow on the other, firing shot after shot in vicious succession at the tall, athletic form of the young man whom he hated so rancorously.

Yet still the two men sped on, and without showing a sign of having been hit, reached the sheltering rocks lying along the edge of the valley nearest the deserted shaft, there turning at bay.

Crack-crack—as a single report, slightly prolonged, and with a wild howl of bitter agony the leading Imp leaped up in the air, turning nearly a complete somerset before striking the ground—a corpse!

Prince Lucifer flinched, bending sharply to one side as a red-hot iron seemed to be drawn swiftly across his cheek, and with this double warning he savagely cried:

"Back, men! Right and left, to the rocks! Hold the devils from stealing off under cover, but wait until I give you further word!"

Only too gladly the rustians obeyed, for chasing fleeing men was one thing, charging those same men when they turned to bay, with solid rock cover behind and before them, rifles in hand, was altogether different.

A mocking yell broke from Silver-tip Sid, and his trusty rifle caused another of the enemy to limp painfully before the evil gang got safely to cover.

Fairly beside himself at seeing his hated rival actually escaping without hurt or scar, Calvin Solander would have charged that temporary fort in his blind rage, only for the restraining hand of his father, who drew him back behind the heap of débris formed by those long-ago gold-seekers.

"Don't be a fool, lad!" he snarled, choking the young man down as he watched to see that the two men did not renew their flight before his gang could gain cover from which they might hope to hold them in one place. "We've got 'em foul! We've got 'em right where we can shut our hands and crush them to pulp whenever the notion takes us. And—we've got the bonanza!"

In his vicious glee at this thought, Prince Lucifer for an instant forgot that the two men whom he had driven away from the Golden Phantom bore weapons, and he moved forward to eagerly peer down that deserted shaft. Only to start back with an oath as a bullet struck the dirt opposite, dashing bits into his face and eyes.

Though far beyond pistol-range, the old shaft could be commanded by the Winchester rifles carried by Silver-tip Sid and High-water Mark, and with this fact forcibly impressed upon his mind by that narrow escape, Prince Lucifer lay low while shaping his plans of action.

At all hazards this particular point must be uncovered, for from what he had learned from those cryptograms, together with what he had seen while spying upon the movements of the two pards that day, he firmly believed that at the bottom of this identical shaft lay hidden the long-lost treasure amassed by Paul Solander.

Everything went to prove as much. And there the rude but sufficient means of solving for all time the mystery of the Golden Phantom were awaiting him: windlass, rope, tools and all!

His wits quickened by this reflection, Prince Lucifer lay low and studied the situation before him, noting the place in which his enemies had turned at bay, together with the various other points on each side and to its rear. And right there he found what he believed was the safest solution!

Using the mound of débris as a shield until safely out of range, Prince Lucifer hastened by a circuitous course to reach his men, and under his directions they began to force the enemy, stealing along under cover, sending a liberal stream of lead in advance, several of their best shots clambering up the steep rocks in order to gain a point from whence the little fortress manned by Silver-tip and Mark could be easily commanded.

More than one ugly shot came back in answer, but Silver-tip Sid was too old a mountaineer to be caught in such an open trap, and with High-water Mark he beat an adroit retreat, his movement being unsuspected until it was too late for the road-agents to hinder them.

"It's all right, though," grimly laughed Prince Lucifer, as he saw where the two men had taken refuge, high up among the rocks, where they might possibly be starved into subjection, but could be forced only at a terrible loss of life. "They're beyond range of the old shaft, and if I once unearth that treasure, devil take the men for me!"

"I'll kill him or he'll wipe me out!" viciously snarled Calvin Solander, to whom revenge was far more precious than gold, just then. "Only for him, Ruby would be here with us, alive and well!"

Prince Lucifer turned upon his son with a growling curse, his hand clinched for a blow which would have laid that growler flat, had he not ducked so nimbly. He had sternly forbidden any mention of that name, until a libation of blood had been poured out to her memory.

Awed and silenced, Calvin Solander fell back, leaving Prince Lucifer to post half of his men in positions from whence, without too great peril to themselves, they could keep the enemy from retreating further or from stealing out to win a "pot-shot" at those who were to attempt the bringing to light of Paul Solander's buried treasure.

"Come, kid," said the chief villain, when he had seen his men at their posts and feeling reasonably confident that when he cared to crowd matters he could claim his deferred vengeance on Mark Bywater. "There's a fortune awaiting us over yonder! And you and I must be the ones to bring it fairly into the light of day!"

Without a word of objection Calvin bore him company, though he would greatly have preferred to lie among the rocks, watching and praying for a shot at his bitterly-hated rival. But Prince Lucifer had changed wonderfully since the tragic death of his idolized daughter and the loss of the twin prizes for which he had plotted and schemed so long and desperately. And Calvin dared not flatly cross his wishes while that dangerous mood lasted.

With half a dozen stout rascals the two men made their way back to the old shaft, and with precious slight delay they were ready to put their fierce hopes to the test.

A rude light was lowered down the shaft, to mark its depth, which proved to be much less than either of them had dared hope. Calvin longed to suggest that this was because the greater portion of the hole had closed through repeated caving-in, but dared not take the chances with his gold-bitten father.

Tools which they had brought in plenty were lowered down the old shaft, then, one after the other, father and son were lowered, standing with a foot in the loop below which swung a goodly sized skin bucket for the purpose of sending up dirt as they should dig it.

The bottom was reached, and Oran Solander eagerly glanced about them, uttering a laugh of grim triumph as he saw that there had been but little caving since the shaft was deserted, thanks to the care with which the walls had been boarded up.

But little more than a square shaft; whoever had constructed it went but little further, clearing out two irregular pits or chambers, which may have been intended to grow into extensive drifts or tunnels.

"What's the odds?" Oran laughed, catching up a pick and driving it to the helve in the earth before his feet. "They may have gone broke on it, but we—we'll unearth a treasure big enough for a hundred!"

For more than an hour the two men worked, sending up the dirt as it grew inconvenient, Calvin catching something of Oran's fierce enthusiasm as time went by.

And then—with a hoarse, gasping cry the elder man dropped his pick as it struck something hard—iron, surely!

With his shovel, with Calvin's hands, the dirt flew aside in a shower, both men dripping with cold sweat as they drew still nearer the—what was it to prove?

Not iron: stone! And as they pried it up with a pick, brushing away the dirt with trembling fingers, they read, carved in bold letters:

"FOOL! CAN YE GRASP A PHANTOM?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HOW THE CURSES CAME HOME TO ROOST.

THROUGH all this time High-water Mark and Silver-tip Sid watched and waited, both suffering torments which words are hardly capable of describing, though the ever-buoyant Rocket did his level best to look at the cheerful side, and to win his companion over to the same view of the picture.

"What's the odds of they do? Let 'em do the work, an' we'll eat the puddin' when it gits good an' ripe an' ready fer chawin'," he muttered as they watched the two men lowered into the old shaft, and noticed the windlass being worked to bring up dirt and stones, after a while.

Mark gave a savage growl, his pale, strained face showing how hard he took this sudden and wholly unexpected reverse, just when his glad hopes were soaring highest.

Not for the gold which he had every reason to believe was lying at the bottom of the old shaft; though in after time he no doubt would value that as it deserved, just now he thought only of it as a means by which he could make his peace with Una Freestone; by which he could wipe out those careless, long-repent words which had sundered two truly loving hearts for so many weary months.

"It'll be hotter'n hot down yon' way, an' turrible back-breakin' work, ef ye don't want to think I'm a howlin' liar fer the tellin' of it, pardner. An' so—jest le's r'ar back onto the ha'nches o' us both an' take it easy! Le's jest ca'mly look on an' see 'em haul the dornicks 'u

yaller to light. An' then, when they're gittin' dead drunk through the eyes of 'em a-lookin' at it— Waal, what'll we be doin'?"

"I'll have the treasure if I die for it!" fiercely panted Mark.

"But we jest will—all but the dyin' part," cheerily assented the veteran.

He broke off abruptly, however, and Mark caught his breath with a painful gasp, for they could see those far-away men about the mouth of the old shaft, springing into sudden activity, whirling the windlass around like men who feel a rich reward awaits their labors.

"Already! have they found it?" panted Mark, gripping his rifle as though he would crush its bore together where his fingers encircled the deadly tube.

That a discovery of some sort had been made could not be doubted for an instant, for as the skin bucket came to the top, the ruffians crowded about it, two of them lifting some heavy object out, bearing it away to a safe distance from the mouth. And then harsh cries floated across and upward to where the two adventurers were watching with burning eyes and bated breath.

"Ef I jest hed eyes long 'nough to stretch clean over to yan'" muttered Silver-tip Sid, excitedly. "They've hit somethin', but—billy-bejo-hammered ef I kin begin fer to puzzle it out—no, I cain't!"

Then the bucket was lowered again, and still again, the first trip bringing up Oran Solander, the second his son, Calvin.

The whole party then gathered about the heavy object which had come up first, but if this was the long-sought treasure, then the finders treated it after a very curious fashion. For, if such distant eyesight could be depended upon, the road-agents were fairly wild with rage and disappointment.

"Good Lawd!" spluttered Silver-tip, dancing about like a turkey on a hot plate. "Ef I could jest— Durned ef I don't take a clean flop down yen' way of the p'izen imps keep up that circus much longer! I'll jest hev to—or go bu'st wide open fer queerness!"

"It's not the treasure, at all events," said Mark, with a long breath of intense relief. "It's something that maddens instead of gladdens—look!"

They saw a single figure separate from the rest, moving directly toward their little fortress, at the same time fixing a white rag or kerchief to a slender stick cut from among the stunted bushes growing near the old shaft.

"It's Oran Solander!"

"An' he's comin' fer a pow-wow!"

The two men gazed quickly, keenly into each other's eyes.

"I reckon mebbe we'd better," nodded Silver-tip Sid, gravely. "But keep a finger on trigger, ready fer to meet tricks with full pay!"

The spot where the two adventurers had sought final refuge, was near the point where the narrow valley began to curve sharply toward the northeast. It was the highest point near at hand, though only a few rods from the edge of the valley, or its level, and with their backs guarded by a solid rock, their front given a breastwork several feet in height, the position was a really strong one, such as two resolute men might defend for a long time even against a powerful force of armed foemen.

Without a trace of fear in his bearing, Oran Solander walked on until a stern challenge from Mark's lips halted him, almost directly in front of their little fortress.

"Halt, Prince Lucifer! you've come far enough until you show cause for venturing so far!"

"All right. My lungs are as sound as yours!" coming to a pause.

"A pesky sight sounder than they will be afors you git out o' this!" was the grimly significant addition from Silver-tip Sid, as his rifle dropped to a level.

With a swift motion Oran Solander spread the white flag over his breast, but that was all; he made no move to duck or dodge, nor did his hands seek to draw a weapon.

"Shoot, and brand yourself a cur!" he cried, in bitter scorn.

High-water Mark swiftly placed a hand over the muzzle, and Rocket lifted the weapon with a grim laugh, saying:

"Jest wanted to make sure they was 'nough o' man 'bout ye fer to fill the sights when time come fer wastin' a ca'tridge, critter. Now—if ye come to shoot off yer mouth, pull trigger an' git it over. The wind is at your back, an' we're mighty ticklish 'bout the nostrils!"

"I come to say a word to you, Mark Bywater, and—"

"We are one in this, Oran Solander," was the cold interjection. "What one says, the other backs. If my pard is not good enough to share the talk, neither am I."

Even a trifle will sometimes throw a man off his balance, and so it was with Oran Solander on this occasion. He had come to offer terms as one who held the game in his own hands; now he felt that he was more of a suppliant than a master, and it galled him deeply.

"You've ciphered out that infernal crypto-gram, Mark Bywater, and you know where the

long-lost bonanza is hidden. Swear to share it with me, or you'll never live to see the sun rise again!"

"Then you didn't find the treasure down in the old shaft?"

"You mocking devil!" snarled the villain, almost frothing at the mouth as he detected—or fancied he did—a jeer in that question. "I'll murder you by inches for that foul jest! I'll—"

"Skin out o' that in a holy hurry 'less you'll ketch your last death!" sternly cried Silver-tip Sid, handling his rifle menacingly.

"What he says, I repeat, Oran Solander," cried Mark, sternly. "You can offer no terms which either of us would stoop low enough to accept. Go your way, and bear in mind that if your whelps dare to crowd us, some of them will be lacking when that sun comes up again!"

"An' one'll be jest your size o' nat'ral cussedness, too!"

"You distinctly refuse to share your secret with me, then?"

"Will you go?"

"Yes—to return, armed with something far different from this bit of white rag!" harshly laughed the outlaw, turning and striding off toward the spot where his men were awaiting the result of his mission.

As Oran Solander drew nearer the old shaft, a fat, clumsy figure made its appearance from the other side of the valley, and Andrew Merrydew joined his fellow-schemer.

"There's only one way: to charge the devils and take 'em in!" Oran Solander harshly cried, hurling the useless flag aside.

"But—if they fight until we have to kill them?" remonstrated the fat lawyer, his thick lips quivering with disappointed avarice.

"It's long odds the rascal has the solution of the twin cryptograms written out somewhere about his person. If not— Well, we'll find the puzzles, and still be no worse off!"

Of them all, Calvin Solander was perhaps the one most overjoyed at that deadly decision. He cared for little else, just then, but to come to close quarters with Mark Bywater. If he could only kill him!

Thoroughly maddened though Oran Solander was, he was too cunning a knave not to make use of every possible advantage, and though he gave his ruffians orders to press the fight until a complete victory was gained, he at the same time told them to make use of such cover as lay most convenient, covering their charge as much as possible.

Long before this every member of the gang had learned how bitterly their hopes had been foiled, with insult added to injury; for despite the aged appearance of those carved letters, Prince Lucifer swore they owed that biting insult entirely to Mark Bywater. And swearing to make the stone serve him as a head-stone, the Imps gladly prepared to press the fight to the bitter end.

Although they so greatly outnumbered the adventurers—being a round score in all—they knew that it would take hot and desperate fighting to carry that little fortress, were it properly defended.

"Take it we must!" sternly said Prince Lucifer. "Steal as close as you can under cover, then give a volley and close in!"

Terse enough, but quite sufficient for the bold rascals under his banner. And with grim resolve the armed force began their advance.

Calvin Solander, his face white as that of a corpse, took care to keep at a safe distance from his father, for, with that prospect opening up before him, he did not care to take any chances of being held in check.

"One of us must die!" he grated, his eyes glowing as though backed by living fire. "I'll kill him—or he'll kill me!"

A terribly long and trying ten minutes; then a shot was fired at the rock fort by Prince Lucifer, swiftly followed by a rattling volley from his men. Then—Calvin Solander leaped forward in advance, sending a stream of fire and lead from each hand as he charged.

One shot in reply; and without a gasp or a moan, Calvin Solander pitched headlong, a red spot marking the junction of his eyebrows!

"Tally one fer the ole hoss!" shrilly cried Silver-tip Sid, but if he said anything more, it was drowned by the wild, savage roar that burst from Oran Solander.

He saw his last child fall, and knew that he would never rise in life again. And, forgetting all else, he bounded forward to rescue that loved body.

"Charge!" he howled, hoarsely to his men. "Kill—kill—kill!"

He reached the spot where Calvin lay, and was just stooping to catch him up in his arms, when a bullet struck him. He staggered and sunk to his knees. But, only for an instant. Then, rising with his dead son in his arms, he shook a clinched fist at the little fort, hurling a savage curse upon the heads of those who had deprived him of both his children.

His men were charging, firing, howling viciously. Shots were pouring forth from the little fortress, but not one came near that savagely-defiant figure.

Not a shot followed him as he reeled away toward the valley, that ghastly burden lying across

his shoulders. And, though his men gave way when they saw him, wounded, retreating, he never seemed to know it.

Down into the valley. Up and across it. Over to the mouth of the deserted shaft, where to gently lower that lifeless clay to the ground, and, as he saw dimly the object which he had blindly pillow'd the head of his son upon, he flung up his hands, and, with a gasping, choking cry, fell forward like a dead man.

And all that remained of Calvin Solander, was pillow'd on the stone where the hand of Paul Solander had carved those mocking words!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TORMENTS OF TANTALUS.

ANDREW MERRYDEW had not taken an actual part in that disastrous assault, though he had showed no decided repugnance to exposing his portly person when the attack was being planned and ordered. But, now that Calvin Solander had fallen, and Prince Lucifer was wounded, the old rascal came out of his place of hiding to assume charge of the whole affair.

He found that Oran Solander was badly wounded, though his hurts were not necessarily mortal, and through his groaning lips his authority was firmly established over the surviving Imps.

Perhaps it was just as well for the new chief that he had no intention of pressing the matter along the lines so boldly laid out by the fallen Lucifer. Even his orders, backed by the words of Oran Solander, would hardly have been sufficient to hurl those demoralized wretches against that ably-defended little fortress. But Andrew Merrydew was made of entirely different metal.

By his orders, sharpshooters were stationed at each point which commanded a view of the little fort. They were to keep carefully covered, but ever holding themselves in readiness to take a shot whenever an opportunity was offered them.

This took hardly half a score of their number, leaving the remainder free to rest, sleep, hunt, until the time came for changing places with those on guard among the rocks.

"Slow, but deathly sure!" chuckled the fat old rascal, rubbing his hands with oily satisfaction as he mentally contrasted his own sound corpulence with the pain-racked person of Prince Lucifer.

Like one who feels a good work cannot be too early begun, Andrew Merrydew, even before the sun had set, caused both food and water to be temptingly displayed on the level before the spot defended by the two treasure-seekers, and from a secure cover among the rocks opposite, he mockingly invited them down to partake of the spread.

"An' me jest so mighty nigh holler that the jints o' my backbone is fit fer to saw my belt in two afront o' me!" disgustedly muttered Silver-tip Sid.

Nevertheless he kept a watchful eye on his comrade, ready at all hazards to check a rush for the food and drink in case temptation should overcome the young man.

"Not this evening, pard," smiled Mark, reading that alertness aright. "I wouldn't object to either the food or the drink, but they've arranged a dessert among those rocks yonder which I fear would prove too indigestible for any kind of use!"

"I reckon mebbe," sighed Rocket, licking his lips longingly. "That is fer right now. But ef this yer' thing lasts a week or so longer— Waal, even lead lumps 'th powder-sa'ce couldn't hold no edge on my stomick!"

The sun set, night came on, only partially clear, though the slowly-moving clouds gave no actual indications of a storm.

"Ef it only would, mebbe I wouldn't kick so pesky hard!" grunted Silver-tip Sid, sourly. "It'd be a outside drink, anyway. An' then—ef they was to come one o' them showers o' frogs or fishes ur fresh raw meat, sech as ye read 'bout in the papers 'casionaly—g'way honey!"

For the major part of that weary night both men kept watch and ward, knowing that if they chose to make the attempt the enemy might with comparative ease crawl close up to the rock wall of their little fortress without being detected, thanks to the clouds which almost constantly veiled the face of the moon.

But no such efforts were made, apparently, and as the hours passed by Silver-tip Sid coaxed Mark to lie down and catch a little sleep. He would take his turn when the new day had fairly dawned.

So he promised, and so he fully intended at the time of speaking, but with the coming of light Andrew Merrydew resumed his studied tantalism, displaying food and drink where it could not help being seen by the two adventurers whenever their gaze turned toward the valley or the mound near the abandoned shaft, where the now chief of the Imps had pitched his headquarters.

And not satisfied with this, Andrew Merrydew caused his men each and every one to do his cooking and his eating where, while safe enough from the searching shots occasionally discharged by Silver-tip, their every action could be noted by the besieged.

He bided his time until high noon, when the

power of the unclouded sun made itself the most oppressive, then opened his batteries, firing cunning shot into the little fortress: shot on which he counted far more than if they had come from a rifle muzzle instead of rolling off the tip of his own tongue.

"There's reason in all things, gentlemen," he called out, from his secure covert, "and you've reached the limit in that direction. You want food and drink and sleep without haunting dreams: we want a share of the valuable information which you certainly possess. Now, why not show up sensible men, instead of staying fretful children? You talk, and we'll provide the feast."

There came no reply, though he could catch a glimpse of the two besieged behind their rocky breastworks.

"Sooner or later you've got to come up to the rack, you know, gentlemen," he persisted, in those same oily tones. "Say that you can hold out another day, a week, or even a month, for that matter! Of course the very idea is preposterous, but let it go at that. We can wait six months, or a year, just as easily. So, since even a fool can see that you *must* in time come to the rack, why wait until the fodder is dry and musty and unpalatable? Why not make a virtue of necessity, and come down with the grass, not waiting for the stones?"

Still utter silence from the little fort. And, stung far more keenly than he would have cared to admit by this evidence of contempt, Andrew Merrydew lapsed into silence, grimly granting hunger and thirst more time in which to do their work.

As the sun began to set, Mark and Sid began to prepare for an attempt to steal away under cover of the night, but long before the time came for this effort to begin, it was abandoned. For under Andrew Merrydew's directions, fires were kindled all around and kept blazing through the night, rendering any such attempt equivalent to death from the hiding sharpshooters.

Again did their patient, malignant enemy do all that evil brain could devise to increase their thirst and hunger. Once more the food and drink were displayed, apparently wholly unguarded. And one by one the Imps cooked and ate their food, stretching the operation over long hours, each minute of which was an age of torture to those haggard-faced treasure-seekers.

"Shell we wait for dark, or jest make a break for it right-off?"

High-water Mark shook his head at the last suggestion, though the provisions thus maliciously displayed seemed a magnet too powerful for him to remove his hungry gaze from that spot.

"We'll wait for night, if we have to," he huskily muttered, his throat so dry and parched as to make speech difficult. "It's more than life with me—death or capture means the loss of—all I hold sweet and precious on earth!"

Silver-tip Sid said no more, doggedly gripping his rifle as he glared with reddened eyes about in hopes of catching sight of at least one of those cunningly-hidden sharpshooters.

"It'd sorter ease up the gnawin'!"

It was Mark who had to hold the veteran in check now, and Mark who seemed coolest, steadiest, most reliant. And it was Mark who proposed work that would help to busy their hands and brains through at least a portion of the day which must pass before they could hope to make a successful "break."

"That cunning devil is having fresh fuel collected, you see, old friend," he explained, with a nod toward the other side of the valley where the Imps were busied among the rocks. "He means to light up the whole region, just as he did last night."

"Then what's the use o' waitin' fer dark when no dark cain't come out o' it?" growled Silver-tip Sid. "Why not make a split right now?"

"Because we don't know just where those devils are posted on this side," was the quick response. "Let's make out first, then we'll charge right at them, and either be put out of our misery at once, or break through the line for good and all!"

He explained how he hoped to do this, by removing part of their clothes and forming dummies sufficiently life-like to deceive the Imps into shooting at them when exposed; and as Silver-tip was ready to accept anything which offered the ghost of a chance, the two men were soon busy, crouching low down behind their breastwork out of sight.

But scarcely had they begun, when shouts and firing startled them into leaping up and catching their rifles, Silver-tip hoarsely crying:

"Hyar they come, pard! Cut a clean swath through 'em—to the grub an' drink!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ALL PATHS LEAD TO THE GRAVE.

Down the narrow valley charged an armed force of horsemen, cheering and firing as they raced, but not a bullet was directed toward that little fortress!

"Look! God of mercy—Silver-tip!"

Mark Bywater dropped his rifle, gripping the arm of his companion with terrible force as he pointed down and outward to where—

"The little lady, by the 'tarnal'!"

Not until he received this confirmation of the glad yet incredible truth told him by the first swift glance, did High-water Mark allow himself to believe that it was reality, not a phantom conjured up by his disordered brain.

But now, even as the glad truth burst upon his bewildered brain in its full force, he saw those arms outstretched, he caught the sweet music of that dear voice—

"Go fer her, pard!" cried Silver-tip, overleaping the breastwork and plunging down the slope. "I'm gwine fer drink an' chuck—I be!"

Neither one of the couple took part in that brief fight and hot pursuit; Mark was too busy sipping renewed life from those red, willing lips, and Silver-tip was laying in a bonniful supply of provisions against another possible siege.

The Imps made but a slight resistance, for Oran Solander was lying delirious from his wound, and Andrew Merrydew hid his bald head in the nearest cover the instant powder began to burn and lead to fly.

One or two of the outlaws were slain, others were wounded, and a few were taken prisoners. Among the latter was Andrew Merrydew, who vainly tried to convince his captors that he was innocent of aught worse than being a poor prisoner, held for ransom by the road-agents!

Una Freestone, noting how terribly Mark had suffered from starvation and lack of sleep, firmly refused to tell him why and what had brought her on the scene so opportunely; and now that he felt his past faults were wholly forgiven, Mark was willing enough to wait a little longer for that information.

With her own fair hands Una prepared food and hot drink for her lover, and then, as overtasked nature began to yield, it was her gentle eyes that watched over the heavily sleeping treasure-seeker.

It was bright dawn before either Mark or Silver-tip awoke again, fresh and strong as ever, but—

"Hongry 'nough fer to eat a bull critter; huffs, horns, hide an' taller!" as the veteran gravely declared.

Then it was that Una, her beautiful face all aglow with love and joy and womanly triumph, divulged her secret. For secret it was; or had been! The secret of those baffling figures, and those puzzling holes burnt through each cryptogram!

She had made the discovery through pure accident. She had been puzzling over the cryptograms, and was about to put them away for the night. In so doing, she inadvertently placed them face to face, but with one cryptogram covered by the end of the other in which the holes were burnt, when she saw that, instead of words showing through the holes, as was the case when each cryptogram was doubled back upon itself, figures could be seen. And then, like a flash of light, the truth burst upon her whirling brain.

Swiftly as possible she drew out the alphabet, putting a letter which corresponded to the number in each square, calling A number one, and thus running down to Z, or number twenty-six. Then looking through the holes and reading from left to right, she found the secret clew!

"The holes on one read 'Mark South for East,' and on the other, 'For North read West,'" she hurriedly explained, illustrating with the papers brought along for that purpose.

Then she told how the Parkers set to work, raising a goodly force of armed men while awaiting the scout whom they had sent out to the neighborhood of Satan's Ear, and how, when he returned to report the presence in that vicinity of a strong force of armed desperadoes, she insisted on at once starting to the rescue.

Much more was said, on both sides, but this is enough to shadow forth the whole truth, which is all that is needed in this connection.

While Mark and Silver-tip were sleeping, Una had completed all necessary arrangements for the coming day's work.

Andrew Merrydew was left to care for his wounded fellow-schemer, with a guard to watch them both, and to guard against possible rescue by such of the Imps as had made their escape by flight. Then Una, Mark, Silver-tip Sid and the two Parker brothers rode briskly away toward Satan's Ear, bent on thoroughly testing that last-discovered clew.

Shortly before noon the little company reached Satan's Ear, and though Silver-tip Sid did murmur something about dinner, the rest o' the party were too eager to set that long-puzzling question at rest for all time to pay any attention to the hint.

Laying their course by compass, only taking a line directly west instead of north, the party pressed on in quest of "a long valley" as their next proof that the last clew was something better than another "blind lead."

The valley was found, at about the proper distance, and as on an earlier occasion, Silver-tip Sid was the one to first discover a "big flat rock, with a cross carved on top."

"But—durn it all!" he spluttered, frantically scratching his head the while as he noted the

direction in which the right arm pointed. "It p'ints plum South, an' the paper reads East!"

"Not the revised edition!" laughed Una, but with her lovely face turning a shade paler as her eyes met those of Mark Bywater.

Was it possible that, after all, the Golden Phantom was about to be proven a substantial reality?

Mark drew her a little apart from the rest, his own face very grave as he spoke, earnestly:

"This is wearing on you, Una, and I fear the results if we go on. Say the word, and I'll drop the matter forever!"

"If you do, I'll insist on picking it up, Mark," was the swift reply, but then her eyes drooped, her face blushed most divinely as she nestled a little nearer his strong arm to murmur: "For I've determined to find and place this fortune at your feet—as part amends for my cruelly unjust words of—you know, dear!"

Only Silver-tip Sid saw what followed: and he turned his eyes away so quickly that it gave him "a crick in the neck" from which he did not entirely recover for at least an hour!

Together the now acknowledged lovers determined to follow the clew to the end, and forever settle that long-vexed question as to the reality of the "Golden Phantom."

"That goes, as a matter of course," said genial Fred Parker, when this decision was made known to all; "but, that's no reason why Miss Freestone should actually take part in the search, now it has narrowed down to this valley. What's the matter with her getting up a bit to eat, against our coming back?"

"An' the boss kin tote the wood an' tend the fire," rejoiced Silver-tip Sid, innocently.

Both Mark and Una raised some faint objections, but none of these were listened to or heeded. So, leaving the lovers to cook and otherwise enjoy themselves, the three men laid their course by compass and resumed the search for the Golden Phantom.

With their departure the lovers almost forgot their existence, and never gave that long-coveted fortune another thought.

Mark gathered wood and kindled a fire. He filled their little coffee-pot with water from the brook flowing down one side of the valley, placing it on the fire to come to a boil. And then, while waiting for this to come to pass, the lovers sat down in the shadow of that gnarled cedar hard by and—

Well, that aged tree may have heard much, but be sure it gave no sign. And what it heard it kept forever a secret.

Only when Silver-tip Sid gave a tremendous cough to announce his coming did the lovers remember where they were and what they had been expected to perform.

The water was boiling furiously, but it gave out no fragrant scent in answer to Silver-tip's eager sniff; and this fact may have lent his homely face a deeper look of dejection, though his words would seem sufficient to account for that lack of elation.

"Not a smell—nary a ole shaft kin we find, nuther!" he said, busying himself about the packages of cold food brought along.

"Nothing but an old grave," confirmed Fred Parker, removing his hat and wiping his heated brow. "No doubt that of some luckless devil of the gold fever. Ugl! it gave me a shiver as I stumbled across it, and noted the inscription carved on the broken headstone."

"An inscription?" asked Mark, as his eyes met those of Una, both recurring to that engraved stone now marked by the blood of Calvin Solander. "Of what nature?"

"Grim enough," with a fleeting frown. "It tells of one brother having been murdered by another."

Silence fell over the little group, which was hardly broken until that hasty meal was finished. Then the three men declared that they meant to resume their quest as long as light lasted, and as they set forth, Mark and Una bore them company.

Only as far as the grave which the searchers had stumbled upon, almost hidden from sight by the grass and weeds which had sprung up all about it. And while they moved on down the valley, Mark knelt and broke away the grass and weeds that covered that inscription from view.

The stone was a rough slab, and some accident had probably broken off one corner from the top, as it stood upright at the head of a long, narrow mound, for the name which began that inscription was incomplete, and a bit of stone had fallen out from its face, leaving a blank where one letter should have shown.

Raughed in irregular lines, the inscription read as follows:

"A NOLD SHAFT—.

"Killed by his brother,

"ABEL SHAFTER."

"Poor fellow!" muttered Mark, strongly affected by that grim memento of a bloody tragedy. "No doubt he came to this lonely valley in search of gold—that precious curse, which has, as in this case, so often turned the hand of brother against brother! And we—"

A faint, gasping cry from Una's lips startled

him, and turning, he gave an exclamation of anxious solicitude as he saw how very pale her lovely face had turned.

She was pointing with a finger that trembled visibly—pointing at that rude tombstone and its roughly-cut inscription.

"Una—my love—what is it?" cried Mark, catching her in his arms and drawing her back, fancying that a venomous snake had frightened her, if indeed she had not actually felt its fangs.

"Look—the words—AN OLD SHAFT!" Una gasped, then adding: "This is no grave, Mark! It is the lost clew we look for! See! below that seeming grave lies the fortune of Paul Solander!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HOW THE GOLDEN PHANTOM MATERIALIZED.

MARK BYWATER lifted Una in his arms and bore her rapidly away from the grave, for the time being convinced that long brooding over the buried treasure, added to the recent exciting scenes, had temporarily unsettled her brain.

Mark persistently turned the subject every time Una tried to speak of the pretended grave and its cunning inscription, and finally she gave over the attempt, content to wait until the little party was once more united.

Even then she held her busy reasons in check until the late evening meal was dispatched, smiling in secret as she saw how very closely Mark watched her face and noted her slightest actions, ready to interfere should her poor brain again show signs of giving way.

That frugal meal over, the men lighting their pipes and leaning back in the grateful glow of the fire to take the rest they had so well earned that day, Una abruptly changed her location to one fairly beneath the friendly wing of Silver-tip Sid, begging his protection against Mark Bywater. And then, when the little company were sorely puzzled, she quickly made known the belief which had flashed into her mind while gazing at that mutilated inscription.

The Parker brothers listened with perplexed faces. Mark turned pale, his eyes showing deep anxiety and pain. But Silver-tip Sid, after one keen look into those glowing eyes and animated face, leaped to his feet, tossing his hat high into the air, giving a wild yell and breaking into a clumsy dance such as would have put to blush each and every one of his long-haired namesakes.

"Good Lawd! An' us plum' crazy idjits never did! An' the weenty bit o' angel—she got that an' never hafe tried! She see'd a hole clean through the millstun! She—Holy smoke! ef Moses was only hyar, right now, I'd hev a dance or go bu'st wide open—I jest would, now!"

Perhaps it was this sudden and complete confidence placed in woman's intuition by the veteran that caused it, or possibly the longer they reflected on that seemingly wild explanation of the mutilated inscription the more reasonable it appeared, but be that as it may, the Parker brothers joined hands and smiled heartily as they joined in the cheer raised by Silver-tip Sid.

Only Mark held out, and he was thinking wholly, solely of the girl who was worth to his heart far more than a score such fabulous treasures as old Paul Solander had amassed to bury them again from all human ken.

Silver-tip Sid saw this, and acting with his usual shrewd good sense he drew the brothers a little apart, leaving the lovers together.

"Ef you knowed all I knowed, pard, you wouldn't think it sech a mighty qu'ar streak fer the young feller to hit into. An' then it does sound jest a weenty bit too mighty like a story-paper—now, don't it, pard, when ye come fer to look it squar' into the face o' it all?"

"Yet I believe Miss Freestone has hit the blunt facts!" declared Fred Parker, in which opinion he was promptly backed up by John. "It's a mighty curious affair from start to finish, and this would just round out the case to perfection."

"To be c'ose it would," with a vigorous nod. "But whar's the use in keepin' all two both on 'em on nettles? What's the matter with us playin' off a bit, jest fer tha'r good sakes? Why cain't we make b'lieve that mornin' 'll be plenty soon fer to tackle that grave, an' then—Eh? Why not? Don't ye reckon?"

Silver-tip Sid was growing just a bit incoherent in his owlish attempt at mystery, but his present companions readily comprehended his meaning, and for several reasons they were only too willing to join in with his humor.

While they more than half believed Una had hit upon the full and true solution of Paul Solander's intricate cryptogram, it was possible that she had made an error; that grave might indeed be a silent witness raised to blacken the memory of a crime-stained brother; that narrow mound might cover a mass of moldering bones instead of the Golden Phantom for which so many had longed and searched.

Returning to the camp-fire, they quietly discussed the matter for a short time, seemingly decided to put the matter to a test with the coming of a new day. And then, after Una retired to the little tent which had been brought along for her nightly use, Mark was also induced to lie down to await his proper turn for guard duty.

No sooner had he fallen asleep than Silver-tip Sid and Fred Parker stole silently away from camp, bearing tools and a lantern, bent on putting all doubts at rest concerning the grave of Arnold Shafter.

John remained on guard, and to hold Mark in check should he awaken too early for their schemes.

When his eyes did open they were startled by the gray dawn, and with a sharp cry of wondering irritation he gained his feet.

"What was the use, old man?" laughed John Parker. "That coffee was so blessed strong, and I swallowed so much of it, that I couldn't have caught a single wink even if I had turned in. So—Grub is ready, and only waiting for the belle—May you be the only lucky man who ever has the right to 'ring' it, Mark!"

"Thank you, Mr. John!" blushingly yet laughingly cried Una, as she stepped out of the tent, just in time to catch and comprehend the full meaning of that earnestly-jesting speech.

"Who said grub-bell?" spluttered Silver-tip Sid, leaping to his feet, with a wildly exaggerated yawn. "Hope may grow thin ef I don't feel jest as hungry as ef I'd bin diggin' graves the hull blessed night clean through—I jest do, now!"

Una's purple eyes opened a bit wider as they roved swiftly from face to face. Mark frowned just a trifle, and his face grew graver. But Silver-tip Sid was busting off to take a bath in the brook hard by, and the Parker brothers were busy arranging their frugal breakfast.

Not once while that meal was being discussed was the treasure mentioned, though it surely must have nearly filled the minds of all there present. Not until the meal was ended. Then—

"Ef you'd stoop so low's to condescend fer to be so kind as to ketch the arm o' me fer a weenty bit o' walk, ma'am, honey-bird, why—waal, ef you jest would, now!" gravely uttered Silver-tip Sid, bowing until one involuntarily listened to hear the joints of his back creak.

"And if you'd just consider yourself our prisoner for a bit, Mark Bywater!" cried the Parker brothers, each one catching an arm and leading the bewildered young man away in the direction of the grave.

Una gave a start and a little gasp, then panted:

"Oh! you did—you found it all out, last night?"

"Hope may die ef 'tain't jest so, ma'am!" chuckled Silver-tip Sid, unable to longer keep up the little comedy.

And then he felt as though a deserted beehive had suddenly closed over his head! For white, plump arms were about his neck—ripe lips were kissing his stubby face—

"Good Lawd! Holy smoke! Ef I only knowed how to 'spress it!"

And as Una released him to run lightly after her captive lover, the veteran's legs gave way beneath him, and he dropped in a bewildered but entirely blissful heap on the ground!

Gathered about that grave, which was but a grave in semblance, the story of that cunning night's work was told, and the proof that the Golden Phantom was indeed a glorious reality made clear.

For, lying deep down beneath that cunningly-mutilated headstone, the diggers had come upon a mass of hide wrapped about a thick covering of oil-skin, inside of which lay the "Golden Phantom," which they had after so many long years tracked to its last resting-place!

A great mass of gold in dust, flakes, beans, nuggets, with a quantity of coined pieces. But by far the greater portion of Paul Solander's millions was represented by bank-notes and certificates of deposit, all of which were recorded in a little notebook, together with evidence amply sufficient to insure their recovery by his chosen heirs when they could prove "heir right to make application."

With the rest was a letter which fully detailed his reasons for disinheriting all of his own name: reasons which brought grave looks to those interested faces and caused Una to shiver and bide her pale face on Mark's shoulder as she reflected how wholly she had fallen into the hands of the Solanders, father, son and daughter!

When this was read, Mark lifted Una's head, gazing into her eyes as he held up the letter. Una nodded, and Mark arose to strike a match and touch it to the paper.

Not until the last spark died out—not until his foot had forever scattered those ashes—did any one speak again.

Silver-tip Sid remained behind to drop that now useless "headstone" into the empty grave, then shovel in the loose dirt and stones which had been removed to uncover that valuable secret.

"I don't reckon they's so mighty much need o' doin' of it, but when all them that's 'titled fer to know the secret has got it pinned down tight into the minds of 'em, what's the use tantalizin' other pore critters? Dust to dust an' Stay putt, Arnold Shafter!"

The treasure was safely packed, Mark taking

charge of the papers and books; then the little tent was struck and stowed away, the camp was broken for the last time, and our friends turned their faces once more toward the point where Oran Solander had found his "Golden Phantom."

They were met near Satan's Ear by one of the men whom they had left on guard over the wounded Prince Lucifer and the captive Andrew Merrydew. His face told of ugly tidings, and the Parker brothers quickly led him aside where they could receive his report without the words being caught by Una.

From the very first she knew that something had gone wrong, and her face grew paler. But not for very long.

"You are with me, dear Mark!" she murmured, and in those words she told all.

The Parker brothers received the report brought by that messenger in grave silence.

Oran Solander had revived from the shock following his wound and the sight of his last child falling dead before his very eyes. He had recognized Andrew Merrydew, and before a hand could be lifted to interfere, he had shot the old lawyer, the bullet passing directly through his scheming brain.

Death was instantaneous. He never uttered sound or word. It may be doubted whether he ever knew what was the fate which had so suddenly overtaken him.

Oran Solander fell into a fit of frantic raving, immediately after firing that death-shot, and though efforts were made to quiet him, without using actual force, they failed.

Then—the madman caught up the body of his son, and with it in his arms, either fell while trying to escape, or else jumped directly down the old shaft where he had unearthed that grim reproof.

He was dead when they brought him back to the surface, and now—what was to be done?

Fred Parker took charge of Una, for the time being, while John hurriedly explained matters to High-water Mark and Silver-tip Sid, putting that same question to them.

"They're dead, an' it's hard luck fer to talk black words ag'inst all sech," gravely said Sidney Rocket. "Yit—they don't deserve all the time an' trouble it'd cost fer to tote 'em to whar they could bev a reg'lar plantin' and a sarmon spoke over 'em. So—bury 'em in the hole whar they tried to do murder in playin' fer the big stake; bury 'em in the old shaft whar the ole man found his death!"

And so it was decided, at length.

John Parker took charge of that part of the ugly business, while Mark, Una, Fred and half a dozen of the citizens enlisted at Paragon City struck out in a direct line for the stage road.

"Fer ye don't want to fergit that thar's Moses waitin' fer his master to git back. An' then—"

Silver-tip Sid cut himself short, his face growing very sober as his mind flew back to Dan Dickman, whom he had left in bonds that eventful night, on the hill opposite the retreat of Lucifer and his Imps.

But his face cleared at length, after he had hurried on in advance to look for the outlaw. He found only some bonds, severed by a keen knife, and that told him Dan Dickman had been set free by his fellows, no doubt discovering him while searching for the fugitives.

Moses, too, was discovered to be all right. He had eaten his halter in two, then placidly grazed in that vicinity, awaiting the return of his master. Only stopping to unearth the package which he had hidden away on that evening, Silver-tip Sid mounted his steed and pressed on to rejoin his friends.

Mark took the package with a faint smile, for now that the Golden Phantom had materialized, that cryptogram held no further value, save as a curious memento.

Paragon City was reached in safety, and after a few days given to rest, Una, Mark, Silver-tip Sid and Fred Parker took the stage for the nearest point where the railroad could be struck. In company they went back to the old home, there to unite in celebrating a happy wedding.

Silver-tip, we are sorry to record, got up roariously drunk after he witnessed the knot tied, and had been set fairly wild by a half dozen kisses from the bride's red lips.

"An' who wouldn't? Show him to me, an' I'll show you a double-geared idjit jist fit fer to—waal, jest fit fer nothin'!"

The marriage notice was published and given wide circulation, mainly for the purpose—which it effected inside of a week—of bringing to light the one who held charge of the last proofs necessary to settle Paul Solander's millions on his chosen heirs.

Investigation proved beyond a doubt that Paul Solander had died in the asylum to which his unnatural relatives had consigned him.

Who the "King of the Mountains" really was, or what disposition was made of that poor unfortunate by Oran Solander, forever remained a mystery.

Why linger longer? The chase of the Golden Phantom has ended in complete success; true love has been fitly rewarded; the time has come for putting out the lights and ringing down the curtain.

THE END.

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